
A Step into The Past

Book 20

Huang Yi

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Author : Huang Yi

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Chapter 1

A Union of Mutual Benefit

Under the escort of the 18 elite guards, Xiang Shaolong, together with his brothers Teng and Jing, and Tao Fang made their way towards the Palace. Suddenly they could hear hoof beats from the front and in the dark fog a lone rider was racing towards them, with another 10 odd riders chasing after him. It looked as if the long street has become a lane for races.

Teng Yi shouted, “Stop your horses.”

The rider in front has rode into the ring of light cast by the lanterns and they could see he was bleeding all over his body as he shouted, “Great General save me.”

Everyone took a closer look and was shocked to see that it was Guoxing.

Guoxing wanted to rein in his horse but obviously he could not hold up any longer as he fell sideways to the left of the horse.

Just before the warhorse skidded to a stop and Guoxing was about to crash onto the ground, the sound of the bowstring quivering was heard as an arrow was shot out from the hands of one of the riders at the back. It’s accuracy was so unbelievable as it entered the back of Guoxing’s neck and exited from the front of his neck. By the time Guoxing reached the ground, he is already a lifeless corpse.

Even though Xiang Shaolong's reflexes had always been fast, the scene was enough to make his body go numb.

The 18 elite guards drew their bows in unison and swiftly cocked their arrows.

The group of riders rode up to where Guoxing had fallen and reined in their horses. The leader, Guan Zhongxie was hanging his bow back onto his horse's back as he said loudly, "Commander Xiang have seen it for yourself, Guoxing tried to escape in guilt and your subordinate had no choice but to carry out orders and have him killed."

Xiang Shaolong's whole body went cold and at the same time a storm of fury went up in him. With a 'clang!', he drew out his Hundred Battles Sword and said with a cold snort, "Guan Zhongxie how dare you kill my Deputy Commander right in front of my face?"

Guan Zhongxie's personal guards raised their shields and went in front of him, forming a wall of shields.

Guan Zhongxie replied with a composed smile, "Commander Xiang please do not be mistaken and listen to my explanation. I am under his Majesty's order to arrest the killers who tried to assassinate his Majesty this morning and I found out that the killers were in cahoots with the owner of the Warrior School, Qiu Risheng, who brought them to Xianyang. Now Qiu Risheng and all the killers are arrested and Minister Lu questioned them personally. That Guoxing resisted arrest and ran away as Commander Xiang can very well see. If I have failed my duty in any way, you can always bring it up to his Majesty,

Minister Lu and the Dowager.”

He then added in a shout, “Take away the body!”

For a moment Xiang Shaolong did not know how to react as well as he shouted, “No one’s allowed to touch him!”

Since Guan Zhongxie has gained the upper hand, he just laughed and said, “Commander Xiang has given his orders, would I dare to disobey? Let us leave!”

He slapped his horse and went away.

His men retreated on their horses for ten odd steps before shouting in unison as they turned their horses’ head around and ran after Guan Zhongxie.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest looked at one another, their eyes finally resting on Guoxing’s body, lying in a pool of blood with an arrow in his neck.

Tao Fang sighed, “In the end we still underestimated Lu Buwei. This move is indeed extremely vicious, not only destroying the Warrior School and at the same time cause us and Lao Ai a loss of face. He can also point the finger towards Lao Ai, or even Du Bi and Pu Hu now.”

Teng Yi said seriously, “Maybe Lu Buwei will make use of this opportunity to cause more trouble and deal with Lao Ai and his men.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, “He definitely will not be able to touch Lao

Ai. Xiao Jun, send some men to help settle Guoxing's funeral affair and at the same time protect his family. I will enter the Palace immediately to see his Majesty and discuss how we should handle this matter."

He nudged his horse's belly and rode forward, unable to take another look at Guoxing's gruesome outcome.

All along, although Guan Zhongxie is his enemy, he still felt there are certain similarities between them and there's an inkling of understanding.

But at this moment, he only wants to tear him in pieces and he won't feel an ounce of pity at all.

When he reached the main road leading towards the Palace, it was jam packed with humans and carriages. The officials and royalty all behaved as if they had no idea of the bloody exchanges in Xianyang City and were all happily on their way to attend the feast.

When he reached the Palace gates, he met Lord Changwen, who came up to him with a grave expression and said, "His Majesty happens to be looking for Shaolong!"

Xiang Shaolong suddenly remembered something and instantly broke out in sweat as he told Teng Yi, "Xianyang City will definitely be heavily guarded tonight, Zhao Da and Dan Meimei..."

Teng Yi was hugely shaken as he replied, "I understand!" before turning back.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly instructed Lord Wenchang to send a team of Imperial Guards to follow Teng Yi and protect him before he entered the Palace to attend to the summons.

He still can't come to terms with Guoxing's death.

Indeed his head has been clouded by victory, that he didn't even think about how widely spread is Lu Buwei's power in Xianyang City.

With his intelligence, how can he not come to the conclusion that with the assassination attempt on Xiao Pan's life, Du Bi and Pu Hu will certainly become implicated.

Now that Lu Buwei has arrested Qiu Risheng, it's obvious that he wants to deal with Lao Ai.

But he knows very well, or rather he knows from history that before Lao Ai public rebellion, there is nothing Lu Buwei can do to Lao Ai.

Once one makes an enemy out of Lu Buwei, one careless mistake can mean a huge loss.

Once he thought of how Guo Xing had just offered his allegiance and ended up being shot dead by Guan Zhongxie right in front of his eyes, the sense of fury and helplessness really made him feel the impulse to immediately rouse his Wu family's elite warriors and kill their way into Lu's residence.

At this point in time Xiao Pan is in the study talking with his trusted aides

Lord Changping, Li Si, Wang Chi and Wang Ling, his expression strangely calm. When he saw him coming, he called out joyously, “Grand Tutor, dispense with ceremony.”

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to suppress his tumultuous emotions and sat down below Wang Chi, asking solemnly, “What’s the current situation?”

Wang Chi replied, “Guan Zhongxie sprung a surprise attack on the Warrior School earlier, Chang Jie and An Jinliang were killed immediately. Qiu Risheng’s right arm was shattered when they beat him with poles and the 200 odd warriors in the school were all arrested. On top of that, they questioned two of the injured assassins and obtained evidence. There’s no way Qiu Risheng can deny anything.”

Li Si who was sitting opposite added, “Those people have been sent to my place, including Qiu Risheng, who all insisted they were under the orders of Lao Ai. Because the re-opening of the Weinan Warrior School was all due to the support and protection of Lao Ai, it’ll be very difficult for Lao Ai to keep himself out of this matter.”

Xiao Pan said, “I was looking for Grand Tutor because I want everyone to have a discussion, should we make use of this matter to get rid of Lao Ai?”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly understood. Although Xiao Pan was forced to accept his marvelous plan of using Lao Ai to curb Lu Buwei, but in face his hatred for Lao Ai is overwhelming because Lao Ai has taken Zhu Ji’s attention away from him.

Xiao Pan would very much like to find a chance to seriously hurt Zhu Ji in order to satiate the anger in his heart. Now that the Black Dragon is born, he is no longer so afraid of Lu Buwei like in the past, that's why he feels that this idea is extremely tempting.

Once he, Xiang Shaolong, nods his head a little, Xiao Pan will give the orders. And maybe the other person who hates Lao Ai more than Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei will immediately send his men to kill all of Lao Ai's family and warriors, really castrate him and only hand him to Li Si, the Minister of Justice after beating him to submission.

Zhu Ji herself holds no real power and if Xiao Pan doesn't stand on her side, Lu Buwei will be able to do whatever he likes.

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh, "Where is Lao Ai now?"

Lord Changwen answered, "He and a huge group of his trusted warriors have hidden themselves at Sweet Spring Palace. The Dowager sent her people here to summon his Majesty twice but was rejected subtly both times."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize the danger of the situation. Things are happening too fast, Lu Buwei must have known long ago that Qiu Risheng is connected to this matter so he deliberately planned his attack before the start of the feast so that everyone will not be able to react in time.

Everyone's gaze landed on him, they obviously know Xiao Pan's intention and they dare not object, neither do they wish to object. So they're waiting for him, the person who can influence the future Emperor Qin's decision, to

Speak up.

In fact, Xiang Shaolong is hard pressed to find a strong reason why he should object.

He saw Xiao Pan's bright eyes, staring unwaveringly at him, filled with yearning and anticipation.

Ultimately Xiao Pan still treats him different from the others. Even though his authority is growing day by day, in the end he will still steadfastly respect his opinions.

He gave a sigh before he told them that Guan Zhongxie was killed right in front of his eyes.

Everyone's countenance changed.

Wang Ling cried out with fury, "This is going overboard."

Xiang Shaolong said calmly, "No one in here will give any sigh of regret over Lao Ai's death but we must also consider the consequences."

He then gave Li Si a look.

This can be considered a chance for Li Si to show if he is indeed a true friend.

Currently, besides Xiang Shaolong, the only other person Xiao Pan trusts the most is Li Si. The others fall way behind.

Li Si is an extremely smart person and knows what Xiang Shaolong is thinking of. He nodded his head slightly in affirmation and said, "If we get rid of Lao Ai now, the person most affected would of course be the Dowager. If this were to happen, the Dowager's power will be shaken and it'll be difficult for her to interfere in court affairs. Under such circumstances, if Lu Buwei join forces with the senior officials in court, maybe he will really be able to become the Regent. Then the current favorable situation we created with the Black Dragon will go down the drain."

Wang Chi said solemnly, "We can always propose Shaolong become the Regent in his capacity as the Grand Tutor, especially since Shaolong has already proven his merit by saving his Majesty. Besides, with the birth of the Black Dragon, Wang Guan, Cai Ze and the rest knows who the true ruler is. Even if Lu Buwei wants to twist the situation, I'm afraid there's nothing much he can do."

Lord Changwen agreed, "There is no one else more suitable to become the Regent other than Shaolong."

Xiang Shaolong smiled wryly, "Naturally I am very happy that his Majesty and all of you think so highly of me but since Lu Buwei chose to make things difficult for Lao Ai this time, it must be because he's worried that we will remove Guan Zhongxie from his post and he may not be able to point the finger at the Dowager. Obviously he has something up his sleeves and his ultimate motive will be to deal with our precious dragon."

Xiao Pan was silent for a moment before he nodded his head, "Even we know that Qiu Risheng is in cahoots with Du Bi and Pu Hu so there's no reason for

Lu Buwei not to know. But this time his only target is Lao Ai, with no mention of Du Bi and Pu Hu at all. There must be more to this.”

Li Si’s expression changed, “Could it be that Lu Buwei has already reached a secret agreement with Du Bi and Pu Hu to sacrifice Qiu Risheng in order to topple Lao Ai and the Dowager. Then next he’ll just have to... hei!”

Everyone’s expression changed immediately.

Lord Changwen exclaimed hoarsely, “This is definitely not without basis. Because when Pu Hu was on the way back from the religious rite, he was invited by Lu Buwei to share his carriage. Maybe they’ve reached an agreement in the carriage.”

This is politics.

No matter how impossible it seems, but under the sudden change of circumstances, enemies may become collaborators after weighing the pros and cons.

From Lu Buwei’s perspective, he is already on opposing ends with Lao Ai and Zhu Ji. The political corporation with Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong as the leader is all the more causing him hate. If he did not have the support of Meng Ao’s power, he would have lost his life long ago. But if he collaborates with Cheng Qiao, who cares only for gains, his situation will naturally be very different.

Xiao Pan said with a somber expression, “I had not considered this point.”

Wang Ling heaved out a cold breath, “Ever since Black Dragon was born, Lu Buwei and Du Bi were at a loss and in their effort to regain their authority, it’s not surprising that they will do this. The problem now is that all of us dislike Lao Ai, so should we take this opportunity to drag him down?”

Everyone’s gaze landed on Xiang Shaolong again.

Once again, Xiang Shaolong is beginning to feel that fate cannot be changed. Lao Ai is fated not to die so early, that’s why this thought suddenly sprouted in all their heads.

To Lu Buwei, Cheng Qiao’s influence is so much lower than Xiao Pan’s, and Du Bi and Pu Hu will never be the match of Wang Chi, Li Si and the rest of their own people. So if Cheng Qiao replaces Xiao Pan as the ruler of Qin, he can only be a puppet ruler and will never be able to have a mind of his own.

From this it can be seen that he is now utterly disappointed in his ‘son’ Xiao Pan.

He smiled and said, “What is Lao Ai? Right now our biggest enemy is only Lu Buwei so for now the smartest thing to do is to keep Lao Ai to keep Lu Buwei in check and after that try to get rid of Cheng Qiao and the rest. By then we won’t have to worry what Lu Buwei will be capable of doing.”

Xiao Pan is still a little worried as he asked with a furrowed brow, “Then how should we deal with Cheng Qiao?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “That’s easy. Order him to lead an army to take down

the state of Zhao, and his relationship with the Zhao will come to light.”

Everyone marveled at the brilliant suggestion.

This is the importance of information. If Xiang Shaolong is not aware of the relationship between Pu Hu and General Peng Ai from Zhao, he won’t be able to think of such a marvelous plan.

Xiao Pan was stunned for a moment before he chortled out in laughter, “There’s no simpler and more direct way than this, but we must wait for the right time. The Black Dragon has just been born recently, I still need some time to consolidate my power.”

After Li Si became the Minister of Justice, his status has changed greatly. He is no longer trying to conceal his abilities as he announced, “Since that is the case, then we should let Lao Ai know very clearly that Lu Buwei wants to destroy him, then he’ll be at greater odds with Lu Buwei.”

Wang Ling said somberly, “But there’s pros and cons to this. We can imagine that after this incident, the Dowager will be clear that Lao Ai’s power is too little and in future will go all out to help him fight for more power.”

Wang Chi snorted, “No matter how hard she fights, he will never be able to become a Great General, so what good use can he be?”

Xiao Pan stood up and the rest hurriedly stood up and bowed.

Xiao Pan said energetically, “I will go and host the Spring Feast immediately.

Grand Tutor Xiang can bring a team of Imperial Guards to escort the Dowager and that fake eunuch to the Palace to attend the feast. Just take it that his life is still not the end this time.”

He then gave a cold snort before leaving.

The rest hurried after him.

Once Xiang Shaolong thought of visiting Zhu Ji, he immediately felt a headache coming on.

Who would have expected that situations will suddenly arise. He'll be grateful if his plan of taking a long 'vacation' is not disrupted because of this.

Xiang Shaolong led the 18 Guardsmen and a 50-strong team from Xiao Pan's best Imperial guards and went grandly to the Sweet Spring Palace. A group of warriors dashed out from the side to block their paths.

Xiang Shaolong had already guessed that Guan Zhongxie would order his men to surround Sweet Spring Palace so he unsheathed his Hundred Battles Sword and shouted, “Who dares to stop me, Xiang Shaolong.”

The Guardsmen and Imperial guards roared as they brandished their shields, bows and spears and made a formation, protecting Xiang Shaolong right in the middle with their arrows and spears pointing outwards, ready to fly out at any moment.

None of those warriors dare to retaliate as they fled from all sides.

The drawbridge to Sweet Spring Palace was drawn and the gates shut tightly.

Xiang Shaolong and his men went to the little moat protecting the palace and reined in their horses.

Guan Zhongxie led Xu Shang and 50 to 60 warriors and went up to them, the former asking icily, "Haven't Commander Xiang gone to join in the Spring Feast?"

Xiang Shaolong thought of Guoxing and wished he could kill him with a stab now. He waited until he came near and reined in his horse before saying with a smile, "If I were to throw my flying needles at Official Guan, I wonder how confident will you be at avoiding them?"

Guan Zhongxie and Xu Shang's expression paled at the same time, their eyes on his right hand which he deliberately left hanging near the horse's body. The former managed to force out a smile and say, "Commander Xiang must be joking, death will of course be my only outcome."

Xiang Shaolong gave a nonchalant reply, "The both of you had better not move rashly, I am not joking. By surrounding Sweet Spring Palace like this, the both of you have already committed the offence of offending the Dowager. If I were to execute the both of you, who would dare to say that I've done wrong."

Xu Shang's reply was calm and steady, "Great General Xiang is mistaken, we are just under Lu Buwei's orders to protect her Majesty!"

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised and said, "So I see, in that case you can retreat immediately, just leave the task of protecting her to me."

A flash of anger was seen on Guan Zhongxie's features as he lowered his head, "As the Great General commands."

He shouted, "Everyone, retreat!"

He turned his horse's head and galloped away.

Sounds of hooves galloping rose.

In an instant all the warriors were gone.

Xiang Shaolong called out towards the gates of Sweet Spring Palace, "Lord Ai please lower the drawbridge."

Sounds of machinery were heard as the drawbridge lowered.

Xiang Shaolong ordered his men to keep their weapons and led the way, marching grandly into the Palace.

He had just stepped past the gates when Lao Ai, Han Xie, Ling Qi, Lao Si came up to him, all dressed to fight.

Xiang Shaolong jumped off his horse and extended his hand to shake hands with Lao Ai as he said with a laugh, "Lord Lao, please forgive Shaolong for

coming late. Is the Dawager alarmed?"

Lao Ai had a look of gratitude as he said quietly, "This matter..."

Chapter 2

Failure despite Preparations

After Zhu Ji instructed Xiang Shaolong to sit next to her, she stared at the night scene of Xianyang through the curtains of the carriage.

The main street was packed with joyous Qins who were celebrating the Spring festivities and the birth of the Black Dragon.

Houses were decorated and sounds of firecrackers popped continuously, an especially sharp contrast to Zhu Ji's empty and helpless state of mind.

Ever since King Zhuangxiang passed away, Zhu Ji has never truly been happy.

Her whole life was made possible because of Lu Buwei, but is also destroyed because of Lu Buwei.

Maybe even she herself cannot determine the grudges and gratitude she has with Lu Buwei.

Lao Ai may look like he is successful on the surface, but ultimately he's just a pawn being made use of by the various factions.

What's unexpected is that with Zhu Ji's intellect and formidability, once she's fixated with men, she'd actually become so muddleheaded.

Just as he was secretly lamenting, Zhu Ji's fragrant lips gently asked, "Shaolong! What should I do in future?"

Suddenly, Xiang Shaolong felt as if he has once again stepped into the time machine and has gone back to the days in Handan when he first met Zhu Ji. He was stunned, "Your Majesty..."

Then he's at a loss for words.

Zhu Ji turned her delicate body and stared at him as she said, "Sorry!"

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "Why do you say that?"

Zhu Ji lowered her head and replied piteously, "I myself have no idea what I'm doing. But sometimes, I really wish that someone would kill you."

Xiang Shaolong knows she's referring to her approval of the duel between him and Guan Zhongxie so he sighed and said, "I will never blame your Majesty, no matter what, I will never blame you."

Zhu Ji's delicate body shuddered as she lifted her head to look at him. After a long moment, she suddenly said, "Is that Black Dragon real or a fake, I beg you do not keep it from me."

A sudden fury rose in Xiang Shaolong, knowing that Zhu Ji is still making plans for Lao Ai. He said icily, "Of course it's real, can such a thing be faked?"

Zhu Ji stared at him morosely for a moment before she turned back to look

out the window again, saying with a wry smile, “Shaolong, you’re angry. Sometimes I really wish that you’d hit me or scold me, then I’ll feel a little better.”

She paused and continued, “I know you too well. From the way you answered me just now, I know that is a fake dragon. Such a grand plan, you must be the one who thought of it because no one would be able to pull off such a trick better than you.”

Xiang Shaolong felt heated as a feeling so strange that even he cannot understand rose up in him. He went near to her tiny ear and said gently, “Right now I really feel like giving your Majesty a thorough beating!”

Zhu Ji’s delicate body trembled and with an “Ah!”, turned her body around, a mixed yet ecstatic look shot out from her eyes.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was about to seal her fragrant lips with a kiss, the carriage stopped suddenly. They have arrived at the Palace.

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed.

There can never be even a slight change in Fate after all.

When Zhu Ji arrived at the feast, Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei and the other officials welcomed her warmly as usual, everyone behaved as if nothing has ever happened.

Pu Hu and Du Bi also attended the feast, their expression serene.

If Qiu Risheng were to have the chance to come here and take a look, he will surely feel that his sacrifice is not worth it at all.

However Xiang Shaolong was in a bad mood over Guoxing's death and when he was seated at Li Si and Lord Changping's table, he asked quietly, "Where is Guan Zhongxie?"

Both of them heard his menacing tone and was shocked. They asked in unison, "What does Shaolong plan to do?"

By now Xiang Shaolong has found Guan Zhongxie, who was seated about five tables below him along the line. He was talking to Lu Nianrong, Xu Shang and Lian Jiao.

Lord Changping tried to lighten the atmosphere and said with a laugh, "Those three talented ladies indeed live up to their reputation. Although their song has ended, it seems that the her alluring voice is still reverberating in my ears."

Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath and said, "I want to kill Guan Zhongxie!"

The both of them were utterly shocked and left speechless for a moment. Li Si could only utter, "Shaolong please think it over."

At this point in time Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei and a group of senior officials have just finished taking turns to offer a toast to Zhu Ji and were all seated in their respective places. The grand hall, which can seat a thousand odd people

quiet down as they waited for Zhu Ji to speak.

Fury raged through Xiang Shaolong as he suddenly stood up.

Everyone's eyes were immediately attracted to him as they concentrated on him.

Xiang Shaolong stood up with a grand aura and said loudly, "The last time I had a duel with Official Guan, the duel had to be stopped because Official Guan's sword was broken. I see today that Official Guan is carrying another precious weapon and suddenly my hands are itching for a fight. I hope to have another duel again with Official Guan, to liven the atmosphere up. Would your Majesty and the Dowager please grant me this request."

The great Hall was suddenly quiet, everyone was taken aback, obviously no one expected Xiang Shaolong would do something like that.

In fact, for the last two duels, Xiang Shaolong was forced into battle. Only this time, because of his anger over Guo Xing's death, he volunteered for the duel.

Right at this moment, everyone knows that Xiang Shaolong is really furious at Guan Zhongxie and is determined to kill him.

Lu Buwei's expression changed slightly. He gave a cold snort and hurriedly reply before Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji could say anything, "It's a joyous occasion tonight, it's not appropriate to flash weapons around. If Shaolong, because of personal grudges..."

There was a long laugh, which came from Lao Ai. He sniggered, "That's a poor remark from Lord Lu. Was the last duel a day of great sadness for you? Then why were you wholly supporting that duel?"

Lu Buwei's eyes shone brightly as he stared hard at Lao Ai for a moment. He was about to retort when Guan Zhongxie stood up and said, "Commander Xiang have very sharp eyes indeed to be able to tell that my new sword 'Shooting Sun' is a rare treasure from the state of Qi and not easily broken. That's what aroused his interest and if your Majesties and Lord Lu allows, Zhongxie would be most happy to oblige."

Xiao Pan laughed, "That's what a good son of the Great Qin should be like, would the Dowager please grant this request."

Zhu Ji looked intently at Xiang Shaolong for quite sometime before her pretty eyes revealed a look of gratitude as she nodded her head, "Our Great Qin has always protected our country with military finesse, and these two beloved officials have embraced the importance of our Great Qin's military essence. I give my blessings."

Xiang Shaolong knows that Zhu Ji has misunderstood him, thinking that he is venting his frustration on Guan Zhongxie because of the humiliation she had suffered. But he couldn't be too bothered about this right now and after thanking her for her approval, he and Guan Zhongxie left their seats to walk towards the center of the hall.

Everyone could feel the atmosphere that is so heavy that it makes one

unable to breath.

This is the third time the both of them are dueling.

Both times, Guan Zhongxie was disadvantaged; will he be able to turn the situation around this time?

On a certain level, Xiang Shaolong is indeed taking a risk this time. Or maybe it's better to say that this risk is not worth taking.

The first time Guan Zhongxie could not defeat Xiang Shaolong is because he thought that there's no point for him getting injured over a man whom he thinks won't have long to live. The second time he lost because he was taken aback as he has absolutely no knowledge of the Hundred Battles Swordplay, and yet he could use the excuse of his broken sword to escape with his life with no injuries at all.

This time Guan Zhongxie already has the experience of dealing with the Hundred Battles Swordplay and he will certainly go all out in this death match to preserve his life. In such a situation, indeed no one knows what will be the outcome.

That's why Li Si advised him to reconsider.

But the Xiang Shaolong at this point in time has totally forgotten about life, death, glory or fame. He could only feel that if he allows Guoxing's murderer to continue roaming freely right in front of his eyes, he will be truly letting down this subordinate who had just pledged his loyalty to him.

In this instant, he has become a true warrior.

Other things are not taken into consideration at all.

Guan Zhongxie is not Lu Buwei. Not a single piece of history or movie has ever said if he will survive this night.

Lu Niangrong who was seated at her table has turned as white as a piece of paper.

No one knows better than her how Xiang Shaolong currently feels about his relentless urge to kill Guan Zhongxie.

Earlier on, Guan Zhongxie was discussing with Xu Shang and Liao Jiao the matter of killing Guoxing right in front of Xiang Shaolong's eyes.

She was already feeling very unsettled then, knowing that Xiang Shaolong will not take this lying down but she did not expect Xiang Shaolong would so angrily challenge Guan Zhongxie into a duel the moment he stepped in.

There's another factor Xiang Shaolong considered, which is Guan Zhongxie's archery skills are too formidable. If there's open warfare in future, once he takes out his strong bow, no one knows who in the opposing army will be able to stay alive. So if he can get rid of him earlier, it would mean saving his own, or even Teng Yi, Jing Jun or one of his men's lives earlier.

This fear that was hidden deeply in his subconscious is enough to make him

determined to kill Guan Zhongxie regardless of the price he'll have to pay.

The two of them went together to pay their respects to Xiao Pan, and Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji, who were seated on either side. Then they split up and each holding their weapons, stood a few feet away from each other, facing off the other party coldly. Because of their special status, the two of them were able to carry their weapons although they're in the Palace.

Right until now, no one has made a single noise.

The weapons have not left their sheaths, yet the whole hall became icy with a deadly aura because of everyone's silence and the tense atmosphere before a storm. The pressure seems to increase around the nose and mouth area, making one unable to breathe smoothly.

Both of them looked as if they're eyeing a prey and after staring at each other for some time, Guan Zhongxie bent his back slightly. The increased aura is enough to make one's mood so tense that one cannot breath.

A cold look shot past Xiang Shaolong's eyes, but unlike the last time, he did not hold on to his Hundred Battles Blade's sheath, making others wonder why he did not make use of his sheath as well like he did the last time.

They saw him walk a step forward sharply.

Guan Zhongxie's back was bent like a bow, like a ferocious beast who is about to charge. Compared to the last time he faced Xiang Shaolong, his confidence and aura is many times multiplied.

Xiang Shaolong seemed unfazed.

These past few days, he has been awake before dawn to practice his swordplay and felt that his condition has reached this highest peak that he has never achieved ever since he arrived through the time machine.

If he cannot win Guan Zhongxie tonight, he can forget about ever winning him in future.

Of course!

This is purely a feel on his part.

It doesn't affect whether it's truly the case or not.

Right at this time, Xiang Shaolong's Hundred Battles Blade left its sheath, changing into a flash of lightning as it pierced through the air yet giving one a strange feeling of lightness and weightlessness. Compared to the last time, which seemed like a fierce thunderstorm, it is even more indescribable.

Guan Zhongxie was obviously very surprised but of course he can't slowly appreciate its beauty like what the others are doing. He immediately dashed forward to attack, pulling his sword out speedily.

Both their movements were as fast as lightning, such that the audience can't even have a good look.

“Clang!”

Guan Zhongxie staggered back violently three steps.

But the martial arts experts like Han Xie, Xu Shang etc could all tell that it was a deliberate retreat by Guan Zhongxie, using his deft moves and battle skills to nullify and expand Xiang Shaolong’s shocking Hundred Battles Swordplay.

So although Guan Zhongxie retreated three steps, he did not reveal any look of defeat.

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Guan Zhongxie would make use of this strategy and can’t help but be stunned. He was about to continue with his attack when a fierce ray of light flashed past Guan Zhongxie’s eyes as his tongue unfurled in a roar and it was like a thunderclap appearing on the ground. He leaped forward as his Shooting Sun Sword counterattacked, first dipping down then flipping up again, aiming at Xiang Shaolong’s stomach, making Xiang Shaolong unable to counter this move with his chopping stance.

The thousand odd crowd who witnessed this silently, on seeing Guan Zhongxie’s sharp and precise attack, were so shocked that they cannot utter even a single sound.

Xiang Shaolong gave a cold snort as he moved to the side with his blade moving in waves to block the space where his chest and stomach was.

With a clash, both of them came together and separated, none gaining even

an ounce of advantage.

Guan Zhongxie was secretly ecstatic, knowing that he has gained insight on how to counteract Xiang Shaolong's shocking blade skills, which is to avoid head on attacks and instead use feather light and swift moves to deal with his solidity.

So with no hesitation at all, Shooting Sun Sword made use of the advantage of being the attacker to execute a delicate and intricate move, much like how a weaver girl will weave with her hands and attacked towards Xiang Shaolong like liquid mercury.

Xiang Shaolong looked solemn as he grounded himself, the pain of Guoxing's death welled up in his heart as he forcefully slashed diagonally with his Hundred Battles Blade, forcing Guan Zhongxie to keep a distance from his moving blade.

For a moment the weapons cast shining reflections with strange and mystical moves, making one unable to fathom the movements.

Although Guan Zhongxie tried his best to avoid meeting head on with the blade, it's quite impossible for the blade and sword to not clash.

Even though there are only two men fighting in the arena, the audience all felt as if they are watching a battle between thousands of soldiers and horses, to the extent that they can imagine the distressing image of bodies filling the battlefield and blood flowing like river.

At this point in time Xiang Shaolong only has one thought, which is to kill Guan Zhongxie in the shortest time possible. Everything else to him is unimportant, including his own life.

He does not know how involved is Guan Zhongxie in Lu Buwei's nefarious plots but this person's intellect is not below that of Mo Ao. Otherwise, just based on his bravery and strength, Lu Buwei will never allow Lu Niangrong to marry him.

As long as Guan Zhongxie remains alive, he can forget about living a carefree life. That's why every move he made is to eradicate his enemy, disregarding his own life in order to kill.

The sounds of the weapons meeting resonated through the hall.

Below Xiao Pan, all of them were staring unwaveringly at the ferocious battle between the two great martial artists.

"Clang!"

After an especially thunderous clash, Guan Zhongxie was finally forced to retreat by Xiang Shaolong's attack.

Using the momentum from the attack and advancing when his enemy is retreating, Xiang Shaolong howled as he attacked with his blade. Waves of blade movements preceded his moving body, rolling towards Guan Zhongxie like tumbling waves.

For the first time, Guan Zhongxie feels at a loss.

Initially he was anxious to attack and very confident that he will be able to kill Xiang Shaolong. However, faced with his opponent's strategy of fighting without care for his own life, which may be filled with loopholes but unless he is willing to forgo his own life together with Xiang Shaolong, there is no way he can make use of these loopholes to attack at all.

Others may not understand why Xiang Shaolong is not using his sheath but he is painfully aware that this is where Xiang Shaolong's excellence lay. Because after his defeat the last time, he'll definitely dissect what went wrong and study how he could deal with Xiang Shaolong's strange fighting method of using his blade on the right hand and the sheath on the left hand. And indeed he made some headway. Because it's difficult to concentrate on the timing between using the blade and sheath to move back and forth, it will affect the dexterity in attacking and defending so it made him think of a way to counteract. But this time Xiang Shaolong is not using the sheath at all and this made his well thought out strategy come to a standstill.

But he's also skillful, coming to an immediate decision to retreat first before attacking, to gain back the upper hand so that Xiang Shaolong will not have the chance to execute the frightening prowess of the Hundred Battles Blade. Unexpectedly, Xiang Shaolong has managed to gain ground of a three feet radius and with his ferocious and forceful attacks, countering his wave after wave of attacks.

Right until he is at the end of his intense attacks and finding it difficult to maintain his advantage, he was finally forced to retreat by Xiang Shaolong.

Exhausted, how could he resist against Xiang Shaolong's Hundred Battles Blade which is coming to him like a frightening tsunami.

An icy, murderous aura followed Xiang Shaolong's precious blade as it rumbled towards him.

That frightening feeling solidified the intense stress that seems to be locking Guan Zhongxie's soul and body in place and for the first time he felt as if he is powerless to resist.

Suddenly, he realizes that Xiang Shaolong has reached the level of epitome of Grandmaster in his swordplay.

Everyone in the hall held their breath, so quiet that one can even hear a pin drop. The countless shadows made by the Hundred Battles Blade seem to merge into one as it slashed towards its enemy.

Guan Zhongxie, now extremely horrified, can no longer tell the changes in Xiang Shaolong's moves.

"Clang!"

The body and the shadow seemed to split up.

Just as Guan Zhongxie was scrambling back, Xiang Shaolong's blade shone dangerously as it attacked again, not giving his opponent a sliver of opportunity to make a comeback.

Everyone on Lu Buwei's side paled.

Lu Nianrong screamed, "Stop!" and she actually dashed out, ignoring the cries of the others to stop her and ran towards the both of them.

Everyone was utterly astounded.

"Thump, thump thump!"

Xiang Shaolong abruptly flew back.

Guan Zhongxie was almost killed, his long sword flew out from his hand as he staggered backwards and he happened to fall into the arms of Lu Nianrong and the both of them fell to the ground together.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting, for although this attack has caused Guan Zhongxie serious injury, it's not enough to take his life. Because he was afraid of accidentally injuring Lu Nianrong, he deliberately made the fatal blow while his opponent still have some strength left in him and thus gave Guan Zhongxie a sliver of opportunity. He only missed taking his life by that little bit.

Blood was seen on both their bodies.

Guan Zhongxie's bloodstain was near his left breast and even his armor was broken. Obviously he barely managed to avoid the blow aimed at his heart. However, he will need at least a few months to recover from his injuries.

Xiang Shaolong's bloodstains were on his left arm and thigh.

Lu Niangrong screamed, "Zhongxie! How are you!"

Guang Zhongxie's face was deathly pale yet he gritted his teeth and said to Xiang Shaolong, "Zhongxie will remember this lesson, and will never forget this blade blow."

Lu Buwei jumped out and shouted, "Hurry up and tend to his injuries,"

A sudden fatigue fell over Xiang Shaolong. He did not expect that even when given such an advantageous situation, Lu Niangrong can still accidentally spoil his whole plan. He fear that such a splendid opportunity will be difficult to come by again.

Chapter 3

The Joining Of the 5 States

The next day Xiang Shaolong used the excuse that he have to rest and tend to his injuries to lead his pretty wives and beloved children as well as the 18 warriors back to the farm. Teng Yi personally led troops to escort them and with Xiao Pan and Lord Chang Ping's agreement, Teng Yi will take over the Military Token while Xiang Shaolong is not around. At the same time Wu Guo will take over Guoxing's duties.

If it was in the past, Lu Buwei will certainly object. But now, as long as Xiao Pan has no objections, military appointments are controlled by Lord Changping.

Of course, Lu Buwei still holds actual power as the Premier, it's just that now the line between the different duties are very clearly drawn and if he insists on interfering in certain matters, he'll be overstepping his boundary.

No one will be willing to let go of his own power, that's why Lu Buwei made the last struggle by joining forces with Du Bi and Pu Hu.

Power struggles are still on the rise.

After they rode out of Xianyang City, Ji Yanran urged her horse and came up next to Xiang Shaolong, asking with concern, "They wanted me to ask if Lord Husband's injuries are still causing you pain?"

Teng Yi, who was on the other side commented with a laugh, “Yanran, don’t you wish to find out too?”

Ji Yanran pouted, “Second Brother, you’re making fun of me.”

On seeing her extremely alluring and dainty expression, Xiang Shaolong can’t help but feel energized and he replied with a smile, “It’s just superficial wounds, not worth mentioning.”

Teng Yi looked pensive as he said, “After all of you reach the farm, the most important thing is to be careful and set up defenses. I’m really afraid that Lu Buwei will take the risk to sneak an attack again, or get people to deal with you through Du Bi and Pu Hu.”

Ji Yanran replied, “His majesty and Lord Changping have just finished studying how they can bring to fruition the plans to control the military. Ever since Lu Buwei appeared, he frivolously made use of the previous king’s trust on him to ensure the generals and military no longer report to the ruler, instead gaining control of the imperial seal privately to mobilize the military. If we can get rid of this bad practice, Lu Buwei can forget about mobilizing troops to deal with us. Otherwise, we’ll just have to move our own warriors and mercenaries out!”

Ever since Shang Yang’s reforms in Qin, the rulers have held tight control over the military, using the system of seal, tally and document.

Seal refers to the ruler’s imperial seal. All military orders and documents, if

it's not affixed with the imperial seal, will be rendered useless. But because Xiao Pan has yet to be crowned, his documents will need the Dowager, Zhu Ji's additional seal before it can be considered effective.

Tally refers to the Tiger Tally, made of copper with inscriptions carved on its back. It's in two pieces, to be held by the ruler and the general respectively. It has to be issued by the ruler and checked to ensure its authenticity before one can mobilize troops. But because of Lu Buwei's tyranny and his excuse that he had to build up the empire and deal with the continuous wars, he held on to the tally and refused to return it. Many times he used his own premier seal in place of Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji's imperial seals to mess up and take over the ruler's authority.

Document refers to the travel document that rulers will issue so that troops from far away will be able to travel unhindered through the passes.

The three items: seal, tally and document must all be present in order to be effective. Any mobilization of troops that will amount to more than 50 men must go through this process. But Lu Buwei's authority is higher than his master and since the time of King Zhuangxiang, he has slowly gotten rid of this requirement. Now Xiao Pan has made use of the Black Dragon's reputation and finally managed to right the wrong.

Teng Yi furrowed his brows, "But this is still of not much use against great generals like Meng Ao who have been guarding the borders for decades.

Ji Yanran said with a smile, "This may not have any authority over border generals who already hold the seal, tally and documents but at least we don't

have to worry a huge army will come to attack the farm. On top of that, with Huan Qi's swift reinforcement troops, I think we can still get some good days ahead!"

Xiang Shaolong chortled happily, "But if Learned Lady Ji wants to use the smooth water of the hot spring to wash her creamy skin*, you'd better be careful during the journey."

*A verse from Tang Poet Bai Juyi's poem, Song of Everlasting Regret, depicting the tragedy between Emperor Xuanzong and Concubine Yang of Tang dynasty

Ji Yanran sighed, "Using the smooth water of the hot spring to wash her creamy skin. Hai! My husband is so refined that it delights Yanran's heart."

Xiang Shaolong's enthusiasm was stirred as he sang loudly, "Using the smooth water of the hot spring to wash her creamy skin, this was when she first received the emperor's favor." and at the same time urged his horse forward with a slap.

During the next few days, Xiang Shaolong enjoyed a carefree life. After practicing his swordplay everyday, he'll either tour the area with his beloved wives, maids and child or practice his horseriding and archery skills. When he's free, he'll study the military stratagems in the Mohist Addendum or discuss world events with Learned Lady Ji to increase his knowledge in the various areas.

Looking at Bao'er growing up stronger and stronger day by day, that sense of

joy and satisfaction is something that nothing else can replace.

His father-in-law Wu Yingyuan was busy keeping in contact with Wu Zhuo, who was outside the farm, and would occasionally leave to purchase supplies.

Tao Fang will personally come to the farm regularly to tell him about the latest news in Xianyang.

During this period he only returned to Xianyang twice, to conduct the grand wedding feast of Jing Jun and Lu Dan'er and to attend the wedding of Yang Duan and Ying Ying.

Time flies as summer left and autumn came. On this day, Wang Ling and Lord Changping suddenly came to the farm to visit him. After not seeing one another for such a long time, it was naturally a joyous reunion.

After dinner, while Wang Ling and Lord Changping were chatting with him in the main hall, the former said solemnly, "The Crown Prince will be 17 years old in a few months, it's time for him to get a Crown Princess. Lu Buwei strongly supports marrying the young princess from the state of Qi and we are strongly opposing."

Xiang Shaolong has already guessed that their sudden long journey to visit him would surely entail some important matter so he asked languidly, "What is the Dowager's opinion on this?"

Lord Changping smiled, "It should be what is Lao Ai's thoughts and opinion

on this. Last month, the Dowager suddenly left for Yongdu and before that, she has stopped attending court sessions for more than 10 days. It seems that Lao Ai has become her spokesperson.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly sighing. Of course he knows that Zhu Ji is hiding in Yongdu so that others will not find out she’s giving birth to a child of Lao Ai’s. He asked quietly, “Did Lao Ai go with her?”

Wang Ling shook his head, “No! He is now in a fierce struggle with Lu Buwei, how can he leave so easily?”

Looking at their expressions, he knew that they are having suspicions about Zhu Ji’s sudden departure from Xianyang.

He tested them, “So who do both of you think is suitable to be the Crown Princess?”

Wang Ling replied, “Meixiu, the granddaughter of Wang Chi. She’s just turned 15, very pretty, virtuous and knowledgeable. No one else is more suited than her to be the Crown Princess.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed, “If that is the case, she is indeed very ideal. But it’s best that you make arrangements for the Crown Prince to meet her. If he’s happy with the choice, it’s easier for us to talk. The only worry now is that the Dowager will disagree.”

Lord Changping said, “This is precisely the reason why we’ve come to look for you. We’ve tried to ask the Dowager about this on many occasions, and

before the Dowager left the city, she once told the Crown Prince that if she's not around, Xiang Shaolong can make decisions on her behalf on all matters."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "Really!"

Wang Ling said, "The Crown Prince said it himself. The Dowager even told him that she trusts Shaolong's eyes and knowledge the most."

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly enlightened. He knows that Lao Ai must have someone else in mind and Zhu Ji can't twist him around and knowing that if Lao Ai gets his way, her relationship with Xiao Pan will worsen so she's pushing this problem to him.

In view of the current situation, even Lao Ai would have no choice but to give some face to Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong said happily, "Then we'll proceed with your wishes. Hey, are you going to send me back to Xianyang under escort?"

The both of them smiled on hearing that.

Lord Changping suddenly changed the topic, "Lord Xinling and King Anli died within two days of each other. The Crown Prince has ascended the throne as King of Wei and the Queen is Dan Meimei."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly shocked, Although he and Lord Xinling were enemies, but he was still saddened on hearing news of his death. Henceforth the lives of Lady Pingyuan and Lord Shaoyuan will surely be difficult.

Wang Ling continued, “Lian Po has indeed escaped back to Chu. Accordingly it was Lord Longyang who let him off, otherwise I’m afraid he’d have become the burial accompaniment of Master Wuji.”

Xiang Shaolong tried his best not to think about things beyond his control and asked, “Has Lu Buwei been up to anything lately?”

Lord Changping sighed, “Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are having minor quarrels every other day and big fights every other week. Meng Ao is leading troops to attack Han and has taken down 15 cities in a row, his reputation is growing rapidly. The Yans and the Zhaos have started fighting again. The Zhaos are using Li Mu as their commander, and how can the Yans be his match. The cities of Wusui and Fangcheng have all been taken by Li Mu. Luckily the King of Zhao was afraid of Li Mu getting stronger and have ordered him to halt his troops, otherwise maybe he’ll have attached the capital of Yan by now.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Price Dan and was feeling perplexed as he asked, “Qi and Yan are not fighting, instead it’s Zhao and Yan fighting. What is going on?”

Wang Ling said, “We’re not sure either, seems like it’s still a fight over land. Ever since the Yans joined Chu to target Qi, they’re now thinking of getting back the land that was taken over by the Zhaos, thus the fights.”

Lord Changping added, “Now Meng Ao is busy making preparations to attack Wei with Lu Buwei’s support. We objected strongly because this matter will sooner or later lead to another joining of the five states. But Meng Ao is away

and Lu Buwei strongly argues that if we do not continue with our military efforts, it'll be difficult for us to maintain our strong advantage and protect the Three Eastern Commandery*. It wasn't easy for us to argue against him because ever since Han and Wei allied themselves together, they're indeed tempted to move and are up to no good. Wang Chi is now at the border of Zhao to keep the Zhaos in check."

*Three Eastern Commandery is in modern day Shannxi

Lord Changping continued, "The Crown Prince once mentioned that he hopes Shaolong will be able to lead the army, to stop Meng Ao's reputation and power from growing stronger day by day, which will make it even for difficult for us to move Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong smiled wryly, "Let's please settle the matter of the Crown Prince's marriage! Have Du Bi and Pu Hu been up to anything lately?"

Wang Ling replied, "They're still trying to expand their power. Cheng Qian gave the excuse that he has to deal with border security to keep on recruiting soldiers and with the financial backing of Pu Hu, sooner or later there'll be trouble. Now the battles in the east are increasing and no one has the time to bother with them."

Xiang Shaolong signed, "Let's drink! These matters will be settled sooner or later, I'll go back with you to Xianyang tomorrow."

The two of them were ecstatic.

Three months later, Zhu Ji returned to Xianyang from Yongdu and she really accepted Xiang Shaolong's suggestion to disregard Lu Buwei's objections and let Xiao Pan appoint Wang Chi's granddaughter Wang Meixiu as the Crown Princess and at the same time held the wedding.

The next year, Meng Ao, under the support of Wang Qian and Yang Rui, launched major attacks on Wei and took over over 20 cities like Suanzao, Yan, Xu, Yaoren, Yongqiu, Shanyang etc, aside from the Eastern Commandery. This makes one more commandery from the original Three Eastern Commandery.

At the same time the King of Yan sent his able general Ju Xin to attack Zhao but was killed by the Zhao general Pang Nuan.

Just as the Zhaos were about to attack Yan, they heard that the Weis were badly defeated by the Qin army and were so shocked and frightened that they made peace with the Yans.

At this time, the Qis were tempted to move. Pang Nuan saw that the situation was amiss and was worried that he'll be sandwiched between enemies so he took it upon himself to travel to the various states and once again resulted in the coalition of the five states Zhao, Chu, Wei, Yan and Han and launched a major attack in Wei, greatly defeating Meng Ao. Whereas Li Mu, the famed general whose reputation far precedes him had his troops countering Wang Chi so that he was unable to go and give reinforcements. The military updates came so fast and furious that the Qin court was shaken.

After Xiao Pan received the reports he immediately sent men to summon Xiang Shaolong back to Xian Yang and suddenly, Xiang Shaolong's idyllic days

which he has enjoyed for quite some time came to an end.

Ji Yanran knows that he won't be able to escape from leading the army this time and insisted on returning to Xianyang with him, hoping to spend a little more time with him.

They've just entered the city gates when they bumped into Guan Zhongxie, who was back on duty after a long period of recuperation.

Although he has lost weight, he is still as energetic as before, his health totally recovered. What is even more rare is that he was still able to smile upon seeing Xiang Shaolong as he said calmly, "I have been ordered to wait here to welcome Grand General, would Grand general please enter the Palace immediately to see his Highness."

Then he lowered his voice and added, "That blade from Grand General has taught me many things which I never knew in the past!"

Xiang Shaolong was very tempted to ask him 'For example?', but he ultimately held himself back. After instructing his wives and child to return to the Wu residence, he rode towards the Palace with Guan Zhongxie.

The atmosphere in Xianyang was obviously tense as the passers-by moved hurriedly on their way. Soldiers on patrol and troops moving military supplies could be seen everywhere. The atmosphere feels as if there's an impending storm.

To the Qins, they have never forgotten the previous defeat under the

coalition of the five states previously and now it seems that another defeat is coming so naturally they were all feeling alarmed as they talked about it.

Guan Zhongxie said, "I'll be marrying Third Missy next month, I'm afraid Grand General would not be able to attend my wedding feast."

Xiang Shaolong answered with a wry smile, "I hope I'll be able to come back alive to attend Lord Guan and Third Missy's wedding feast!"

A sarcastic look flashed past Guan Zhongxie's eyes as he just smiled without saying anything.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly feeling hateful but there was nothing he can do to him.

Everyone knows that in this face off with the approaching coalition army, the outcome is almost a complete loss and they'll just be defeated. He can start counting his lucky stars if he even manages to keep the enemy at bay. The worst thing is that Meng Ao has just been badly defeated by the coalition army and morale is low, and now he's going to take over the reins. One can imagine the difficulty.

The two of them spoke no further and went straight to the Palace.

Xiao Pan was waiting alone at the study for him.

This future Emperor Qin is 18 years old in name, and he can be formally appointed as King in another three years. He was strong and well built and on

seeing Xiang Shaolong coming, left his seat eagerly to clasp his hands tightly. After sending the servants away, he pulled him aside to sit down and said seriously, “Teacher, save me!”

Xiang Shaolong was startled, “It’s not that serious!”

Xiao Pan smiled wryly, “The situation is extremely dire. The coalition army was gathered outside Hangu Pass, and has won seven out of seven battles, greatly defeating Meng Ao. Now we’ve lost Hangu Pass. The worst is Wang He kept losing advantage to Li Mu at the Zhao border and now he’s only able to try to defend. If teacher can’t push the coalition army back this time, Great Qin will be in peril!”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt that Xiao Pan has turned into that playful child from the Zhao Palace six years ago and a strong feeling surged in him and very naturally he used a famous quote of Zhuge Liang from Chu Shi Biao*, “I will give my all to the country until my dying breath!”

*Chu Shi Biao – Documents submitted by Zhuge Liang to Emperor Liu Shan
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chu_Shi_Biao)

Xiao Pan was taken aback, “Please don’t ever mention the word ‘die’, only Teacher is capable of turning the tides now.”

At this point in time, the servant came to announce that the dowager and the various officials have already gathered at the inner courtroom to await his arrival. The two of them hurriedly left the study and went to the inner courtroom.

Besides Zhu Ji, those who were present included Lu Buwei, Feng Qie, Lord Changwen, Wang Ling, Li Si, Wang Guan, Cai Ze, Lord Yunyang (Ying Zuo) and Lord Yiliang (Ying Lou). The latter two in recent years have been governing their own areas and this time they actually came back to Xianyang together so one can image how dangerous the situation is now.

On seeing Xiang Shaolong, Zhu Ji's beautiful eyes brightened immediately. She's put on a little weight but still very alluring.

When Lu Buwei saw Xiang Shaolong, he looked relieved on the surface but Xiang Shaolong can feel very clearly that he's secretly gloating over his misfortune.

After they paid their respects, Lord Yiliang, Ying Lou reported, "The army strength for the coalition army this time is as follows, Zhao army 80,000, Chu army 150,000, Wei army 120,000, Yan army 50,000, Han army 100,000, which brings it to a total of 500,000. After the defeated Hangu Pass, they have not moved but have set up defenses while waiting for reinforcements and supplies. General Meng has now retreated to about 200 miles away to set up defenses along the river . If he lose the defense again, our enemy will be able to come straight at us and if they use the water route, they will be able to reach Xianyang in 20 days."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize the severity of the situation.

Lord Changping continued, "Now we're moving our soldiers from all the other areas and have gathered 150,000 and in addition to the 120,000 men

in General Meng's hands, we have a total of 270,000 men. This is only enough to defend but the number is far from being able to fight the enemy back."

Xiao Pan furrowed his brows, "Is there no other way to gather more men?"

Wang Ling reported, "Our enemy made careful plans. The Zhaos and the Chus will separately counter General Wang and General An so that they will find difficulty in splitting their forces to reinforce us. I've thought of all ways and means before I managed to gather this amount of soldiers and many amongst them are actually the old and weak soldiers and new recruits who have yet to complete training."

On hearing this, Xiang Shaolong took a deep intake of cold breath, secretly thinking, with Meng Ao's defeated army plus this batch of new and old soldiers, is there still a need to fight this battle?

Zhu Ji said, "What's General Xiang's opinion on this situation?"

Xiang Shaolong gave no answer but asked instead, "I wonder if the coalition army has appointed a grand commander?"

Lu Buwei answered gravely, "The information we have on the coalition army is very little and even their military strength is just an estimation on our part. From the situation it should seem that the Zhao general Pang Nuan should be the commander. This person is well versed in military tactics and in fact other than Li Mu, he is Great Qin's greatest threat. On top of that, they've prepared for this for a long time and have also learnt the lesson from their defeat the

last time so it'll be impossible for us to use the same trick to force them to retreat again. Everything now will have to depend on Shaolong."

Just as Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting, he suddenly remembered that if this battle is lost, the enemy will surely attack Xianyang. But this event has never happened in history before, so wouldn't it mean that this battle is a sure win. Once he thought of this, his confidence soared.

Ultimately, the person he fears most is Li Mu. As for Pang Nuan, although he has no fear of him, he cannot think too lightly of him as well.

And thinking on a deeper level, since fate has decided that it's impossible that this battle will be lost to a point that Xianyang will be invaded, he can just go all out and do his job.

He came from the Special Task Force and knows a little about military tactics and to use crack troops to counter normal troops. If he follows his usual pattern, maybe there's a slight chance of victory.

Once he thought of this, his heroic spirit rose as he chortled, "I already have a plan, but I wonder who the military commanders of the various states are?"

Everyone saw that he seemed to have changed into another person suddenly and were all feeling surprised.

Xiao Pan answered, "For the Zhaos it's Pang Nuan and Sima Shang, for the Chus it's Wu Zhan, for the Weis it's the up and coming general Sheng Nian, for the Yans and Hans it's Xu Yize and Han Chuang respectively."

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “Other than Pang Nuan, Sima Shang and Sheng Nian, the rest are all familiar people.”

Luckily Lord Longyang is not in there.

In this era, your best friend can at any time become the enemy who will kill you.

Lu Buwei has not recovered from his shock and asked in disbelief, “Shaolong seems confident but you must know that our enemy is strong and even with General Meng’s capabilities, he was defeated in a few continuous battles. Shaolong must not take our enemies lightly.”

Feng Qie added, “This Pang Nuan has been really showing off recently, greatly defeating the Yan army and killing the famed general of Yan, Ju Xin. He’s someone we must not take lightly of.”

Lord Yunyang, Ying Zuo asked, “So what plan does General Xiang really have for defeating our enemy?”

From his tone, he definitely doesn’t seem to believe in Xiang Shaolong.

Actually even people like Lord Changping, Li Si and Wang Ling, who have always had utmost confidence in Xiang Shaolong, were worried for him. The Qins may be invincible, but they’re now terrified by the constant battles with the coalition army.

Xiang Shaolong happened to glance towards Zhu Ji and it so happens that she was staring at him at the same time. Their eyes met and both of them quickly averted their eyes at the same time.

Lao Ai saw all this and his expression immediately became awkward as he interrupted, "Lord Xiang has never really tried leading a formal army into battle. If you're too careless, I'm afraid the result will be defeat."

Just listening to the way he talked, calm and full of himself, one immediately knows that his power has increased greatly and his confidence is soaring.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking, when I was training in the 21st century, who knows where you have been reincarnated to so who are you to criticize me. But of course on the surface he pretended to be humble and said, "To defeat the enemy is indeed more difficult than ascending to Heaven, but to force the enemy to retreat is really no problem."

Everyone was surprised.

Zhu Ji asked, "If we do not defeat the enemy, then how do we make them retreat?"

Xiang Shaolong replied casually, "The key point lies with Tian Dan. Now that the strength of the 5 states are greatly boosted, he will naturally not dare to make rash moves but if the 5 states lose their advantage, he'll definitely make use of the opportunity to invade Yan and Zhao. By then Yan and Zhao will surely be forced to retreat their soldiers and the coalition army will be disintegrated. Minister Lu is most familiar with this matter, why don't we let

him explain.”

Lu Buwei is aware that he is being subtly sarcastic about Tian Dan being in cahoots with him and was feeling a wave of hatred but he can only pretend to smile and reply, “Shaolong’s words are not without reason.”

Cai Ze said, “General still have not told us the plan to put the coalition army at a disadvantage!”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting ‘as if I know’, but on the surface he showed confidence as he replied, “Winning and losing in battle, is not something that can be easily explained with words. Otherwise, Zhao Gao who was so brilliant at military theories won’t end up with the defeat at Changping. But if your Highness will allow me to become the Grand Commander, you must first accede to my three requests, otherwise this battle will be a definite defeat.”

Not waiting for Xiao Pan to speak, Zhu Ji gladly asked, “Shaolong please speak your mind.”

The look of jealousy in Lao Ai’s eyes intensified.

A baddie will always be a baddie. In such a situation where the country should be placed above self, and when Xiang Shaolong is his great benefactor, he is still concerned about his own personal gains.

Xiang Shaolong’s aura boomed as he said seriously, “Firstly is the question of generals and soldiers. I want Teng Yi and Huan Qi to be my Left and Right

Deputy Generals and at the same time I want 10,000 and 20,000 elite riders from the Calvary and Reinforcement troops respectively. As for the 150,000 men already gathered, I want to pick out only the good ones and reduce the numbers to 70,000. With this total of 100,000, it'll be enough to break the enemy."

Everyone did not expect that he'll ask to reduce the number of troops and were all taken aback.

Lao Ai was just waiting for the chance to belittle him in front of Zhu Ji so he asked with his brows drawn together, "Our enemy's army is vast, the number of 500,000 we got is just an initial estimation. For all we know they are still increasing their men as we speak and now that Shaolong wants to reduce our troops to 100,000 and even if we add up General Meng's 120,000 men, it's still not even half of our enemy troops. How can this battle be fought?"

Lu Buwei nodded his head, "Minister Lao's words are reasonable, Shaolong you must reconsider."

A sudden ridiculous thought welled up in Xiang Shaolong's mind. Before his holiday Lu and Lao were fighting constantly with each other and why is it now they seem to suddenly share the same opinions?

Xiao Pan's confidence in Xiang Shaolong is almost to the point of blind loyalty and he said, "The Great general must have his reasons, but can you please explain a little."

Xiang Shaolong replied unhurriedly, "A good army lies in quality and not

quantity. The coalition army may have lots of men but ultimately the various armies are not used to working together and they will certainly face multiple problems in directing and cooperation. Therefore I plan to focus on this point, to reduce our men to only the elite as not only will it increase our effectiveness, it will also boost our morale. Besides, in military maneuvers what is important is being unpredictable and resorting to tricks to win. If there are too many men, it would mean the quality of the troops will be lowered and I won't be able to manage them effectively and will instead end up in defeat."

Lord Changping and Wang Ling were the first to express their agreement and once these two important military men have nodded their heads, how can the others say anything else.

Li Si asked, "As for General Meng's 120,000 men, will Great General be reorganizing them?"

Xiang Shaolong said with all certainty, "Of course. But I want to inspect their condition personally before I make any decisions."

The confidence Zhu Ji has in Xiang Shaolong is only slightly below that of Xiao Pan and she said with joy, "Shaolong's first request has been approved, I wonder what's your second request?"

Xiang Shaolong replied calmly, "The second request is General Meng must be summoned back to Xianyang and I must be given total authority to lead this battle, otherwise this battle will surely be a total loss even before we begin the fight."

This time even Wang Ling and Lord Changping turned to look at each other.

It must be explained that even though Meng Ao lost repeatedly but he has never lost to the point of utter destruction and that in itself is considered a feat. Besides, his experience in leading troops far exceeds Xiang Shaolong so with him at the frontline helping, even if Xiang Shaolong loses, at least it won't end up with the enemies coming straight at them. That's why no one dare to give their agreement so readily.

A look of anger appeared on Lu Buwei's face and as he was about to speak, Xiao Pan answered coldly, "Great General's words are reasonable, an army cannot have two commanders. I totally agree."

Lu Buwei hurriedly interjected, "I think it's best to allow General Meng to retreat to the second line of defense as a precaution."

Wang Guan, Lao Ai and Cai Ze all expressed their agreement to this suggestion.

Xiang Shaolong gave a small smile, "From Hangu all the way to Xianyang, it's all the front line, so where's the second line you speak of. Only if you give me free rein to execute tactics that our enemy will never think of will I be able to force them to retreat with less men than them."

Zhu Ji asked, "What exactly does Shaolong have in mind to force them to retreat?"

Xiang Shaolong replied respectfully, “This is where my third request comes in. It’s stated in military books that when the general is fighting outside, they can carry out their plans first without seeking the ruler’s permission. So I boldly seek the trust of the Dowager, Crown Prince and Minister Lu to ignore any rumors you may hear. Because in this mission I will appear to lose first before winning, and the situation will be that the enemies be allowed to advance first before losing badly. So at the beginning of the battle, please do not lose hope in me because of a few minor losses. As for my plan to deal with the enemy, please allow me to keep it a secret for now because if the plan is leaked, it will not work.”

Xiao Pan slapped the table and sighed, “Great General is indeed an extraordinary man, you’ve considered all details and aspects of the situation before you even moved your army. I will prepare the rites to pray for your victory two days later. The rise and fall of our Great Qin will be in Great General’s hands.”

Just these few words and the heavy burden of directing the biggest battle fell on Xiang Shaolong’s shoulders.

After the emergency meeting ended, Xiang Shaolong had another small discussion with Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei and Lord Changping to discuss the details of the war like food, supplies, reinforcements etc. Only after it was decided that Wu Guo will be in charge of supplies that Xiang Shaolong was able to extricate himself.

He had just left the Palace gates when Lao Ai ran after him from behind and after a round of pleasantries, Lao Ai rode together with him and pretended to

be apologetic, "I was just stating the facts earlier, Shaolong please do not take it to heart."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing him but instead said, "Brother Lao, you think too lowly of me. How can this be considered anything?"

Lao Ai sighed, "But there is one matter which I really blame Shaolong."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "What matter?"

Lao Ai asked with a wry smile, "Why did Shaolong send Meimei to Daliang? At least you should have informed me."

Xiang Shaolong replied him with an equally wry smile, "Because I was afraid Brother Lao will object. At that time it was obvious Brother Lao will lose to Lu Buwei so instead of benefiting that thief, might as well let Meimei go to where she wants to go. Brother Lao still wants to blame me?"

Lao Ai was silent for a moment before he nodded his head, "I find it difficult to accept Shaolong's honesty but I have no choice but to accept it. Hai, I really did not expect that now that my power has increased greatly, I cannot have the girl I love instead. Lose one, gain one, it is indeed distressing."

Xiang Shaolong understood that he's secretly hinting that he has to live according to Zhu Ji's whims and fancies and for the first time can understand how he feels.

No matter how despicable Lao Ai is, he is still a human, with his inner feelings

and sincerity.

There are just too many things in life that one is helpless about.

For example the enemies he is facing, many of them are good friends whom he once chatted and drank with.

And the closest among them is none other than Han Chuang.

If he's really forced to kill him, what would his own feelings be?

Chapter 4

Reconnaissance Satellite

Once he went back to the official residence and found Teng Yi, he asked him to send men to summon Huan Qi back to Xianyang urgently for a discussion.

Unexpectedly Jing Jun had arrived on hearing the news and after knowing that he's not included in the mission, he refused to budge. No matter how Xiang and Teng coaxed or coerced, for example saying the he's just got married and should not go to war, or that they need him in the capital city to lead the cavalry, he refused to listen.

In the end they had to give in and Xiang Shaolong entered the palace again to see Xiao Pan to ask him to appoint Jing Jun as another Deputy General while Lord Changping will look after the cavalry in his absence, with Zhao Da taking over as the temporary Deputy Commander before they could settle this matter.

Next he went to the army camp outside the city to choose his elite soldiers. The old and the weak were all sent home while the new recruits were left with Meng Wu and Meng Tian for training.

Huan Qi hurried back that night and the three brothers, together with Heng Qi and Wu Guo opened up the map and spent the whole night discussing the battle details.

In the morning, all of them took a quick nap before they all set out for their respective tasks.

Xiang Shaolong entered the palace again to have a meeting with Xiao Pan and other than Lord Changping and Lu Buwei, there were also Wang Ling, Lao Ai and the Dowager Zhu Ji.

Although Lu Buwei would very much like to kill Xiang Shaolong, but for his own benefit, he definitely does not want Xiang Shaolong to lose this key battle on which the Qin Empire is hinged on. That's why he portrayed himself to be very cooperative.

Only now did realize how wealthy and strong Qin is, for there're no problems in the supply of food, weapons, horses or carriages at all. They were able to give him whatever amount he asked for.

After the meeting, Lu Buwei, Zhu Ji and Lao Ai left and Xiang Shaolong turned towards Xiao Pan, Lord Changping and Wang Ling and said, "Now the enemy is making quick battles and with the 5 states having a unified goal, their morale is high. If I just go out and fight the enemy like that, defeat is a certainty. The only way is to let the enemy become overconfident, then lure them in and at the same time disrupt their food supplies by moving away all the people in the towns along the way away. Make them lengthen their supply line indefinitely, far away from their base camp, then make use of the dangers in the mountains and forest for our elite soldiers to launch a surprise attack. If we gain the upper hand, we'll chase them down hard but if we can't fight them we can retreat first. This is a good opportunity to destroy their morale and when the time is ripe, we will launch an attack on the enemy and

in this battle, we'll have about 90% chance of winning."

The eyes of the three of them brightened at the same time.

Xiang Shaolong said, "Amongst our enemy's lead generals, most of them are people who knows me well and is aware that I've always been courageous and fears no death. Once they hear that I'm leading the army, they'll certainly think that I'll go for an immediate and swift battle. I'll grant them their wishes, and will retreat after a minor loss and pretend to set up camp to hold the defense. By now it's almost the end of summer and autumn and winter will be arriving soon. Our enemy would not want to miss this chance and will surely launch a massive attack before winter, hoping to at least move slowly closer to Xianyang by taking down the towns and cities on the outskirts. I will set up everything at Zui Cheng and wait for them to attack before winter arrives. If we can just win one battle, they will surely be worried that the snow will pile up on the roads and hence they will be cut off from their supply chain. They will certainly retreat immediately and that is the time for us to give chase."

Wang Ling sighed, "No wonder before his death, Lu Gong kept praising Shaolong as an intelligent and brave warrior ever since Bai Qi. Just listening to the military tactics that Shaolong has just said and I know that your knowledge in military strategies are as good as your skills with the sword; knowing yourself and your enemy, and a hundred battles fought is a hundred battles won."

Xiang Shaolong smiled wryly, "More easily said than done. The actual implementation will have to be done carefully and there must be no

mistakes. Luckily the Grand Commander of the coalition army is not Li Mu, otherwise he'll definitely not fall for this trick."

Xiao Pan said with relief and joy, "Even if Grand Tutor is up against Li Mu, I think both of you are on equal standing. Hai! I can finally have a good sleep tonight."

Lord Changping added, "Once Shaolong comes back victorious, I will definitely hold a feast of at least 10 tables at Drunken Wind Loft to help you celebrate."

After a round of chat and laughter, Xiang Shaolong returned to his official residence and was surprised to see Xiang Bao'er playing with his men at the square. His beloved wives and maids have all come back from the farm and even the long absent Zhou Liang was there and on seeing him, immediately knelt down and cried out, "Zhou Liang was lucky that I have not failed your order and have brought the King Eagle back."

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic, "Where is the King Eagle?"

Zhou Liang stood up, puckered his lips and whistled melodiously.

The sound of the wind being sliced could be heard from above the sky.

Xiang Shaolong was startled and lifted his head up for a look, only to see a grayish-black hunting eagle with a wingspan of about 5 feet soaring down and landing delicately on Zhou Liang's shoulder, its bright and intimidating eyes coldly inspecting the people and things around it.

Xiang Shaolong took a deep gasp and asked, “Doesn’t this King Eagle need a leg chain or have its eyes and head covered by a bag?”

Zhou Liang replied, “Of course not, otherwise how can it be considered the King of eagles. I took a whole year to find it and spent another two years training it day and night before I dared to bring it back to see Master Xiang. I just heard that Master Xiang will be leading troops to Hangu the day after and I am willing to follow you and let King Eagle help Master Xiang spy on the enemy troops. I guarantee it will make great contributions.

Wu Tingfang came up next to Xiang Shaolong while pulling Zhou Wei along with her and said with a smile, “This King Eagle seems to be quite spiritual, like it’s able to communicate with Zhou Liang. No matter where we tried to hide earlier, this super eagle could find us easily. Even when we were hiding in the house, it can look in from outside the window. It was most fun.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking that is almost akin to obtaining a reconnaissance satellite, spying on the enemy from high above the sky. He laughed and said, “Since we have the King Eagle helping us, this battle is a sure win.”

Zhou Liang gave a shout and the King Eagle spread its wings and soared towards the sky and in an instant became just a small speck in the sky.

The King Eagle was circling in the clear sky and below it, in the wilderness, is the never ending line of the great army of Qin.

Qin's military is mainly split into the army and navy, and in terms of expansion and importance, the latter is always lagging behind the former because of actual demand.

The army is further separated into chariots, cavalry and foot soldiers.

By the time of the Warring States period, the use of chariots has been greatly reduced and weakened as compared to the Spring-Autumn period but in some situations, especially battles on flat ground, there's still a use for them. For example, to charge into the enemy's formation to disrupt their formation or maybe to be turned into mobile barrier to stop the approach of enemy troops.

But Xiang Shaolong is looking at the mostly mountainous terrain from Hangu to Xianyang and on top of that, he's not very familiar with the deployment of chariots so in this mission, he decided not to use them at all. The cavalry and foot soldiers will be the main force.

Ever since Xiang Shaolong's Hundred Battles Sword was forged, Xiao Pan gave orders for it to be replicated in volume and with Uncle Qing personally supervising the workers, they made a batch of thick, long swords. Although it can never be compared the Hundred Battles Sword which was forged with chrome added in it but the replicates is enough to greatly improve the cutting and slashing ability of the cavalry for when they charge into battles. This is the first time that it will actually be used.

Amongst the 100,000 men going to battle, the cavalry took up about 30,000 and they were from the mounted troops and reinforcement forces and on

top of that there were 1,000 elite family warriors from the Wu family. These are the main attack forces for Xiang Shaolong.

The foot soldiers are split into light infantry and heavy infantry. They are all formal soldiers who underwent strict training in the various counties.

The light infantry will not wear armor and uses weapons like bows and crossbows and in battles they will usually be lined in the first rows specifically to kill enemies from a distance.

The heavy infantry will wear copper armors and uses pole weapons like spears, halberds etc for close combat with the enemy.

In Xiang Shaolong's expeditionary forces, the light infantry takes up 30,000 men and the heavy infantry has 40,000 men.

In this era, the success and failure of a battle, besides the implement of strategies, it's how the commanders can fully make use of the various types of troops to his disposal and the coordination between them.

As for the organization of the troops, they use the Buqu policy, where 5 men makes a fireteam, 50 men makes a platoon and so on, until 5,000 men will make a brigade and 5 brigades will make a corp. So one corp will consist of 25,000 men and Xiang Shaolong's army strength is 4 corps.

According the Qin regulations, the various ranks of generals are allowed to have their own army and usually will be about 10% of the total army strength, like now Xiang Shaolong will be able to increase his personal army

from the current 3,000 to 10,000.

Because of the constant battles, even if Commanding Generals like Meng Ao and Wang Chi return the troops to the imperial court, their own personal army will not be dismissed and their secondary duty will be to protect the safety of the generals. That's why Meng Ao was able to direct his men to attack the farm in the past.

So once one becomes the Commanding General, not only is his status improved, the power he holds will be greatly increased as well.

Xiang Shaolong's military knowledge comes mainly from the 21st century and although he has studied the Mohist military stratagems, he did not stick to the rules and split up the various different military units. He will leave together with Jing Jun, Teng Yi and the cavalry, Heng Qi will follow behind with the infantry and lastly will be Wu Guo leading the field train.

Because he has already decided to lure the enemy in, Heng Qi and Wu Guo's main forces will stay behind once they reach Zuicheng to strengthen the defenses and plant traps. At the same time Heng Qi will train his men to be familiar with the terrain. This will spare them the agony of long travel and they can disperse the people from the nearby villages as well and let them retreat to the safer and bigger cities behind like Gaoling and Zhiyang.

Moving the troops is a very important aspect in wars and luckily the route to the frontline is the safe official paths within Qin borders. On top of that, they had the Eagle King recce for them so they could travel quickly on the straight and flat roads.

Five days later, Xiang Shaolong's cavalry went pass Zuicheng, with the mountainous regions like Mount Li, Mount Zhu etc on the right, with Mount Hua right ahead of them. The terrain started getting uneven.

In order to preserve his troop's strength and morale, Xiang Shaolong chose to set off early every morning, and set up camp after noon so the soldiers don't find the journey tiring at all.

After travelling east from Zuicheng for another ten days, they finally arrived at Mount Hua.

If they're travelling for leisure, the route along the way is indeed scenic.

Besides with the hot summer now, the green trees seems to be fighting for glory and with the wild flowers in full bloom, the scenery is beautiful.

A pity that no one is in the mood to enjoy them now. On this dangerous mountainous terrain with ravines aplenty, sometimes there're cliffs on one side of the path and on the other side there are deep abyss on the other side with the raging waters from River De rushing below them. They had to walk carefully to avoid making any missteps.

Zhou Liang became Xiang Shaolong's personal follower.

From time to time, the Eagle King will fly back to land on his shoulder and the closeness between man and beast made Xiang Shaolong envious.

Now he finally understands why it's easy for the Qins to attack the six states but for the six states to attack Qin, it's as difficult as ascending Heaven. What Qin has is the dangerous terrain under them, and this time he was able to come up with this trick precisely because of this dangerous terrain.

The five states are actually in the midst of war and are suspicious of each other. But because the threat from Qin is too great, that's why they put aside their own wars for now and joined forces to attack Qin. Such a union will never last for long.

So if he is Pang Nuan, and weather permitting, he will attack Xianyang directly as soon as the opportunity presents itself, so that things will not drag out too long and they end up disintegrating before any fight happens.

So he is not worried that Pang Nuan will not fall for the trick.

After travelling for five days on the mountainous roads, they came to an area where the ground is relatively flat and on the vast plains where flowers bloom, they met Meng Ao and his troops who had been summoned back to the capital.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Meng Ao underwent a simple ceremony to exchange the army tokens and official documents in the commander's tent.

Meng Ao has aged visibly from the last time they saw him, his face lined with harshness, his hair turned from black to white. His behavior was polite yet distant.

He went to great lengths to explain in detail the situation at the frontline and he does not sound optimistic at all.

In the end, he concluded, “That fellow Pang Nuan is indeed the famed military strategist of the east. Now he has set up camp at Hangu, obviously he’s waiting for our reinforcements to arrive before he defeat us in one fell swoop, after which he will make a beeline for Xianyang. Now that I see Shaolong only has the cavalry with you, I can tell that you’ve seen through Pang Nuan’s intentions and won’t be meeting him head on. I am indeed glad to see this.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly impressed, he’s indeed a famed general to be able to see through his own intentions with just one look. He just smiled but gave no reply.

Meng Ao suddenly gave a sigh and asked quietly, “Can I have a few words in private with Shaolong.”

Teng Yi and the rest are all understanding people and they hurriedly left the tent.

Meng Ao looked up at the top of the tent, looking like he does not know where to start. After a long pause, he gave another sigh and said, “I, Meng Ao, have never lowered myself down to beg others so I’ve never been well-liked by the Qins. Only when Minister Lu started giving me opportunities did I have the chance to express my abilities and sweep through the battlefields, expanding my troops north and south and establishing a meritorious career.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head in agreement, “Everyone have their own experience and stand, this I understand.”

Meng Ao stopped looking upwards and instead turned his eyes to stare deeply at him, “I only have two sons and Shaolong had saved them once. I hope that Shaolong will not abandon them in future, naturally I will give something back in return.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, knowing that Meng Ao has seen through that Meng Wu and Meng Tian has allied themselves with him.

Meng Ao said with a wry smile, “Ultimately Lu Buwei will not win you. This time Pang Nuan will not be able to gain any advantage, but Shaolong must be careful of Li Mu. This person is a rare talent in military affairs, never losing a single battle. Even after what happened at Changping, we still dare not talk lightly of attacking Zhao because of the presence of this person. If Shaolong manage to win this round of battle, his Highness will certainly give you the important task of attacking Zhao. When you meet this person, you have to be extra careful.”

Xiang Shaolong could feel the scalp on his head going numb on hearing this. Wang Chi had told him this, and now Meng Ao is saying the same thing. Once he returns to Xianyang he must get Xiao Pan to summon Wang Jian back immediately so that he won't have to face this man, who deserves the respect of everyone, in the battlefield.

Meng Ao gave another sigh before he stood up and took his leave.

The next day they broke camp and set off. When they arrived at the connecting hills where the Qin army had retreated about 50 miles back and was holding fortress, Xiang Shaolong ordered his men to set up camp and defenses, cutting off the only route towards the west.

By now the defending general at the front line Cheng Jun heard of their arrival and hurried over to pay respects to his newly appointed superior.

While everyone was standing on a hilltop looking at the situation, Cheng Jun gave his report.

Xiang Shaolong said, "If my estimation is correct, the coalition army will launch a fierce attack once we arrive and try their best to destroy our defenses to break our men's morale. So you must retreat in batches over the next few nights."

Cheng Jun was taken aback, "You mustn't do this, if my troops retreat last, and because of the low morale of the men, no one will be willing to stay behind and wait for death. If our enemy intensifies their attack, we'll disintegrate without even a fight. Besides, if our enemy catches up swiftly with their cavalry, we run the risk of the entire army being killed."

Xiang Shaolong said with a laugh, "What General Cheng said is right, but that is precisely what I want them to think, that we are inexperienced and will commit this fatal mistake. The biggest problem is to make a neat retreat without any losses."

Cheng Jun has yet to recover from his shock when Teng Yi added, “The first batch to retreat will be the injured, sick, old and weak soldiers and at the same time announce to them that reinforcements have arrived. We have to exaggerate the numbers to 300,000 men, with Wang Jian and our Great General Xiang leading the troops. Only then will the men be pacified and won’t result in chaos.”

Cheng Jun was dumbfounded on hearing that.

Even though there will always be deceit in battles, but the ones being deceived are always the enemy. To lie to their own people is indeed a rare instance but he has no choice but to admit that this is a marvelous way of settling the minds of the troops.

Xiang Shaolong is a legendary hero well known in every family in Qin and although he has yet to make meritorious military contributions, he is the idol of the Qin army, his reputation far precedes him. As for Wang Jian, his military accomplishments are aplenty and his fame has spread far and wide. If these two famed great generals have joined forces to lead the reinforcement troops, morale will be greatly boosted.

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “General Teng and I will accompany General Cheng and sneak back to camp once night falls to arrange everything. General Cheng and your man can rest for a while and gather your strength so that you can work better later.”

Cheng Jun finally understood and left gladly.

Xiang Shaolong, together with Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Zhou Liang, the 18 warriors and the Wu Family Warriors rode out of camp to analyze the nearby terrain and to see what traps they can set up to stop the enemy's cavalry from going after their troops when they are retreating.

They only returned to camp at dusk and after dinner, went back with Cheng Jun to the frontline.

Eagle King flew up into the starry sky to spot the scouts sent out by their enemy and actually found 8 different scouts, whom they manage to avoid.

On seeing such a marvelous flying scout, Cheng Jun was extremely impressed and his confidence in Xiang Shaolong increased greatly.

The Qin's army camp was set up on the top of a hill, facing the road from the west that will lead to Qin and the back of the hill was a vast plain. About 10 odd miles away, campfires were lit up like the starry sky, the whole plain and hills were filled with their enemy's tents and the sight is indeed numbing.

When Xiang Shaolong arrived, Cheng Jun relayed the information as ordered, that Xiang Shaolong has come first leading the first batch of troops and Great General Wang Jian will be coming soon after. Indeed morale was boosted and everyone were rubbing their hands in glee, getting ready to counterattack.

At this time, Teng Yi and Zhou Liang led a thousand from the Wu family Warriors who are adept with mountainous terrains and night subterfuge to secure the important routes. With the Eagle King's astute eyes, they cleared

the area of the enemy scouts who had climbed mountains and crossed forests to get there, to prevent news of them making the troops retreat from leaking.

Xiang Shaolong ordered the hundred odd leaders to his side and after giving them words of encouragement, gave orders for the injured, sick, old and weak to be sent back immediately. Everyone thought that he was showing concern for his subordinates and happily went ahead to carry out his orders.

By dawn, Xiang Shaolong has already sent away close to 3,000 men, leaving only 12,000 able bodied troops to stand guard at the ditches and forts at the frontline.

Cheng Jun accompanied him on his inspection rounds and after going up the highest point to have a close look, the situation on both the enemy and their sides became extremely clear.

He saw that both the enemy and their own people have set up camps on top of the hills and have made use of the what nature has given in the forests and mountainous terrain to set up effective defenses. Trees were chopped to make barriers to protect against arrows and stones and ditches stretching for miles were dug, and the situation looks like they are all getting ready for a confrontation.

The location that Meng Ao chose to set up camp was very advantageous, with the Yellow River on one side to provide a water barrier and cliffs on the other side where even birds will find difficulty flying in. The terrain for about 5 miles between the river and the cliffs, was filled with lines after lines of

barriers and ditches, and on the top of every hill, a solid wooden fortress was built. There were close to a hundred wooden fortresses within sight of each other and in terms of defense, it can be considered flawless. No wonder he could hold the coalition army at bay for three months.

Cheng Jun pointed at the dozen odd ships docked near the enemy camp on the river and said, "That's Wei's ships, who will bring in food, supplies, troops etc and amongst them there are a lot of equipment for breaking sieges. It's extremely disadvantageous to our situation."

Teng Yi asked, "How many large scale attacks have they launched so far?"

Cheng Jun replied, "Only two large scale attacks at the beginning, but we managed to keep them away after much difficulty. There were heavy casualties on both sides."

Xiang Shaolong's eyes swept past a vast, dry landscape that was between them, thinking of the terrible battle that will happen there, and thinking of how his old friends like Han Chuang, Xu Yi etc may very well be on the other side looking at his own side and a mixture of emotions can't help but well up inside.

Teng Yi looked at the endless tents and banners that seems to dot their enemy's camp and heaved a huge sigh, "No wonder General Meng was defeated. Just by looking at our enemy's camp setup, one can tell that the decision maker in our enemy camp is very well versed in military stratagems. Now our enemy's troops are more than five times of ours and if they attack us with fire by day and sneak attacks by night, our defenses will be breached

within 10 days. Obviously they are not making any more because they are waiting for our reinforcements to arrive and when we are still tired out from the long journey, they will defeat us in one fell swoop.”

As Xiang Shaolong was looking up at Eagle King who was circling up in the sky, Cheng Jun pointed out to him how the troops of the five states were distributed and what their banners look like.

Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath, cast aside all his troubles and gave his orders, “We should delay no more. The night after we will pretend that the reinforcements have arrived and lure the enemy into attacking us. Put some wood and hay in the camps burn the camp to hinder the enemy’s progress before retreating in batches.”

Teng and Cheng accepted their orders.

Chapter 5

Luring the Enemy In

The next day Teng Yi went back, leaving Jing Jun to stand guard at the base to arrange matters for the 'reinforcement troops'.

Xiang Shaolong patrolled the camp as usual and when he was high above surveying the enemy's camp, he found their inactivity to be almost illogical and queried, "Have they always been like this?"

Cheng Jun replied respectfully, "They only started becoming this quiet about 10 odd days ago, before that they were constantly sending troops to disrupt us day and night, but it's usually a small scale attack of 20,000 to 30,000 men."

Xiang Shaolong felt that something is terribly wrong and suddenly had a thought, "If the enemy has reached the opposite bank, can they make a big detour upstream, and then cross the river again to surround us by the back?"

Cheng Jun replied, "General Meng has long thought of this point and deliberately placed fire beacons along the river. Once the enemy is sighted, the beacons will be lighted immediately. Besides, the River De is wide and its water rapid with tall cliffs on both sides of the bank. There're no bridges as well so even if our enemy have such intentions, I'm afraid it'll be extremely difficult to accomplish."

Xiang Shaolong is still worried and instructed Zhou Liang who was standing on his other side, "Send Eagle King to the opposite bank to have a look, it'll be better if he can fly a little further."

Zhou Liang set off gladly to follow up on his order.

Ever since he got Eagle King, Zhou Liang seemed to have changed into another person.

Cheng Jun saw that Xiang Shaolong did not trust his assessment and his expression became a little unnatural.

On seeing that, Xiang Shaolong said with a smile, "General Cheng, please do not take this to heart. In war, anything can be changed and we're never far from these four words 'unexpected tactics brings victory'. For Pang Nuan to enjoy such reputation, he must be a capable person. That's why I have to be on the alert against any surprise tactics he may have that we will not expect. If my guess is correct, Pang Nuan must have set up temporary floating bridges with thick ropes upstream of where our scouts will find difficulty in reaching. Once they have crossed the difficult river, they'll keep the floating bridges and move up behind us and repeat the same thing with the floating bridges and let their army cross the river swiftly. Ha, no wonder they had to wait for our reinforcements to arrive before they attack!"

Cheng Jun was speechless on hearing this and secretly commented to himself that 'you're the Great General, of course you can say whatever you like.'

Xiang Shaolong pointed at a dense forest on the right near the hills and

continued, “If I’m Pang Nuan, I’ll order men to hide the chariots and heavy machinery etc in the woods and camouflage them with branches and leaves so when the time comes for them to attack us, the distance needed to move these things will be shortened.”

Cheng Jun replied, “I’ll take note of that.”

Xiang Shaolong guffawed, “Is General Cheng thinking of setting fire to the whole thing?”

Cheng Jun was taken aback, “That dense forest is close to the enemy camp and with ditches and forts everywhere, how can we get near enough to set fire?”

Xiang Shaolong pointed at the tall hills on the left and said, “Climb up that hill and you can throw down the torches, but it is most important to time the use of this tactic correctly. If it’s used when the enemy is attacking, it will cause the greatest effect.”

Cheng Jun was astounded and replied, “I understand now.”

The both of them discussed the various ways they can block the enemy. Because they have to at least make a show of trying to fend off the attack for a few days before pretending to be defeated and retreat, otherwise no one would believe in their act.

Right at this time Zhou Liang returned with Eagle King and said excitedly, “Great General has indeed predicted correctly. From the area that Eagle King

has covered while flying, we can know that our enemy have at least 10,000 men who have snuck up about 15 miles behind us on the opposite bank and getting ready to cross the river for a sneak attack.”

Cheng Jun immediately broke out in sweat and said with shame, “I will immediately tighten defenses around that area.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed, “Hold on! Won’t this be as good as telling them that we’ve seen through their secret plan?”

He reached out his hand, intending to touch Eagle King but on seeing it turn around with its beak open and ready to attack, Xiang Shaolong hurriedly retracted his hand in fright.

Zhou Liang said apologetically, “I deliberately trained it not to get close to anyone else, I seek Great General’s forgiveness and understanding.”

Cheng Jun was more anxious about the enemy crossing the river and asked with utmost admiration, “So what should I do? If we allow the enemy to get behind us and cut off our paths, followed by a frontal assault, we’ll be in dire situation.”

Xiang Shaolong did not reply him first but said to Zhou Liang instead, “Brother Zhou will be in charge of taking note of our enemy’s activities on the opposite bank. You can rest during the day but once it’s dark, you have to be extra vigilant.”

Zhou Liang asked excitedly, “So should I go back to the tent with Eagle King

now and nap?”

Xiang Shaolong chortled, “Exactly!”

After Zhou Liang left, Xiang Shaolong told Cheng Jun, “General Cheng, you don’t have to worry. Just leave it to me to burn the woods and deal with the enemy troops on the opposite bank. You’ll just have to take good care of our base camp and instruct everyone to take turns and rest during the day so that they will have the energy to deal with our enemy at night.”

Drum beats can be heard from the enemy side.

A few hundred war chariots rushed out, followed by thousands of foot soldiers approached them steadily.

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “The enemy has found out that my reinforcements have arrived so now they’re starting their relentless attacks.”

He turned towards Cheng Jun and added, “Now do you understand why I said they can only take turns to rest.”

Cheng Jun replied with total admiration, “I am enlightened.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly finding it comical that he is winning because he has 2000 more years of military knowledge. He just have to randomly choose one or two beautiful tricks from famous ancient wars and he’ll be able to make use of them.

He immediately snuck out of camp with the 18 Warriors and rode along the bank upstream.

Just like what Cheng Jun has said, there were tall fire beacons every 10 miles along the way, each about 50 feet high and at the platform on top there was a wooden beam about 30 feet tall with a horizontal board which can be moved up and down the beam so that the soldiers can climb up to look far away. At the edge of every board there was a large cage stuffed with hay. If they see traces of the enemy, it will give out smoke during the day and fire during the night and with the appropriate signal, inform them of the enemy's numbers and distance.

There's also a huge drum at the top of the platform, made for long distance communication.

But in Xiang Shaolong's perspective as a Special Task Force member, as long as the night is dark with no moon and making use of floating devices, it's not impossible to cross the river and get rid of the signal men atop these beacons. Once he thought of this, he shuddered, already knowing what the enemy is waiting for.

They are waiting for a dark and moonless night, when dark clouds will cover the night sky.

Only under such a situation will they be able to carry out the sudden sneak attack by moving their troops across the river.

Xiang Shaolong came to the where Zhou Liang had pointed out, about 20

miles upstream and realized that the water is less rapid around this area and there are no dangerous cliffs on either side of the bank, an ideal place to build floating bridges to cross the river.

And it just so happens that there is a beacon there as well. From this it can be seen that when Meng Ao was building these beacons, he did put a lot of effort into it.

By now he knows what he should do and went back to camp.

The war cries of the enemy as well as their own men rang in the frontlines but the soldiers at the camp are all so used to it and those who have been given permission to rest are all sleeping, seemingly immune to the deafening battle drums and cries.

Xiang Shaolong went around on inspection and gave encouragement to the troops. He felt like he's the Minister of Defence who is visiting the hardworking soldiers at the frontline as everyone cheered when he approached and morale was boosted.

In the wars of ancient civilization, the morale of an army can directly influence the success or failure of a battle.

When he returned to his commander's tent, he saw Zhou Liang feeding fresh rabbit meat to Eagle King. As it turned out, he was unable to fall asleep.

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "Don't worry, as long as the sky remains clear, the enemy will find it difficult to cross the river. So don't be too tensed."

Zhou Liang heaved a sigh of relief, “That’s much better.”

Xiang Shaolong fell into a deep sleep once he returned to his tent and dreamt of Ji Yanran, the other ladies and Xiang Bao’er. He also dreamt of Qin Qing, whom he has lost contact for a long time and when he woke up he was hit with a painful wave of yearning.

That night, their enemy intensified their attacks and threw huge rocks with their siege machines and destroyed the Qin’s first line of wooden barriers and filled up the ditches. The Qin army was forced to retreat to their second line of defense about half a mile away and only manage to drive the enemy away when they increased their numbers. There were casualties on both sides but of course the enemy suffered much larger losses as they are the attackers.

The next evening, Jing Jun leading an elite team of 2,000 cavalry arrived in camp and reported that the wounded and sick soldiers who were withdrawn are already on their way towards Zuicheng, and the grand army can come tonight.

Xiang Shaolong told Jing Jun about the enemy’s intention to cross the river. Jing Jun commented, “The sky is red in the morning and night, looking at the sky it’ll definitely rain within these two nights. You can leave this matter to me. The enemy will need at least one night’s work in order to build a floating bridge large enough to cross the river.”

Cheng Jun who was standing by the side asked, “What does General Jing

intend to do?"

Jing Jun thought for a moment before replying, "I will withdraw the sentry at the beacons there and if the enemy is bold enough to cross the river, I will wait until they are right in the middle of the river where they cannot retreat or advance and launch a massive attack. We just have to put a few dozen siege engines up there and I'll make them drink the waters of River De."

Xiang Shaolong complimented him, "Xiao Jun have indeed improved a lot. You'll be in total charge of this matter. Just remember that you must bring Zhou Liang with you."

He then asked Jing Shan in and ordered him, Wu Guang, Wu Da and Dan Quan to prepare torches and to climb the hill to burn the forest once it's night.

After the various teams of men have set off, Teng Yi's 'reinforcement troops' arrived.

Dotted across the hills were campfires and lights, most of them were lanterns hung up in the air. There were only a few thousand men but it was made to look as if an impressive tens of thousands men were there.

That night, dark clouds indeed covered the sky. The clouds were thick but yet to rain, a most opportune time for sneak attacks.

Xiang Shaolong went up the viewing post at the frontline and saw that their enemy has gathered a large group of chariots, horses and foot solders with a

few thousand siege engines and were preparing for a massive attack. Instead the dense woods on the left was totally quiet so he can imagine that in the midst of the battle, if a huge group of soldiers were to suddenly charge out from there, they will certainly be able to break through their solid defenses.

War drums were heard and the Wei army led the attack, moving in from the right. The atmosphere suddenly became tense.

On the left near the bank, the Zhao army followed by moving in as well and immediately their morale was greatly boosted.

After working with each other countless times, the coordination of the coalition army is now flawless. No wonder that the Qin army has to take a defeat every time.

The war drums sounded again and close to a thousand chariots rushed out from the middle of the enemy formation, followed by tens of thousands of archers behind them. Because they do not have cumbersome machineries like the siege machine, they were able to overtake the Wei and Zhao armies on both sides in an instant and come straight at them.

The chariots were about ten feet wide with two huge wheels on the sides, pulled along by four handsome horses. It's speed was astounding, giving one the feeling of great power and in an instant they have crossed the flattened ditches, crossed the first line of defense that was destroyed and approaching the rolling hills at the end of the flat grassland.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was about to give the order to meet the attack head

on, the chariots suddenly stopped and the horses were unbridled. The chariots were joined together to form a camp about two miles long.

The strangest thing is that every 30 feet, there will be a space wide enough for three men to pass side by side, making one wonder what is the use of that.

By now the enemy's foot soldiers came up running and after hiding behind the chariots, prepared their crossbows and arrows to prevent the Qins from coming out and counterattacking.

As the chariots were out of the range of the siege machines, Xiang Shaolong had no way of retaliating.

Cheng Jun sighed, "Great General's prediction is correct. Our enemy's move is to block our way in front and if they can really attack us from the back, we'll definitely cannot escape from the fate of being exterminated."

At this point in time they saw another team of vehicles coming up but it's no ordinary chariots but cumbersome supply trains. It advanced at an aching slow pace, even with eight donkeys they were dragging them with much labor so it's obviously those vehicles are filled with things like rocks.

Only now did Xiang Shaolong and Cheng Jun understand that the gaps that the chariots left in between earlier is to let these rocks vehicles pass to build another layer of base defenses nearer to themselves.

If they were to allow the other party to build up this vehicle base, their

second line of defense may very well be breached by tonight.

But because the other party has already prepared chariots and archers for protection, they indeed have a chance to succeed in using vehicles to build up a base camp.

War cries were heard from their two sides, the enemy on their left and right are beginning their attacks.

Xiang Shaolong surveyed the area and according to his estimation, the enemy has at least invested 200,000 men in tonight's attack and their actual force is already more than twice of theirs. If their base camp is breached, they can only just wait to be killed.

On the enemy's side, five different colored banners were hung high up as they organized their formation. He can expect that Han Chuang will be one of them.

Cheng Jun and the other dozen odd generals all turned pale, obviously shell-shocked by their enemy's expertise in military stratagems and their overwhelming manpower.

Xiang Shaolong calculated the time and gave his order, "Call for a batch of 10,000 strong shield soldiers and archers, prepare the siege machines. When the dense forest on the left side is on fire, leave camp immediately and attack to destroy the enemy's vehicle fortress."

The immediately went to carry out the orders.

War cries were heard again, a team of close to a thousand foot soldiers dashed out from the vehicle fortress and shot out fiery arrows.

The Qin's army camp immediately retaliated by throwing rocks to stop the enemy.

It's an extremely tragic situation. The originally dark sky is now shining a bloody red from all the fires being lighted.

It's the first time that Xiang Shaolong is personally experiencing a large scale attack and defense battle in ancient settings. He could feel his adrenalin rushing and at the same time a sense of sorrow welled up in him. This sort of mixed feelings is something that he cannot really explain.

When the enemy's hundred odd supply trains carting rocks and their siege machines were slowly approaching them, the dense forest on the right suddenly caught fire in a few areas and the fire was quickly spreading.

Just as Xiang Shaolong expected, countless soldiers who were in hiding ran out in alarm from the forest, most of them were riders who are the most reflexive.

The morale of Cheng Jun and the others were greatly boosted and their confidence in Xiang Shaolong soared as their enemy started panicking.

The war drums of the Qin army started beating as their gates opened and three groups of shield soldiers advanced forward with the archers following

behind, launching a counterattack before the enemy's vehicle fortress had a chance to be formed again.

About 10,000 odd cavalry dashed out from the left and right sides simultaneously, charging at and killing the enemy and to disrupt the enemy's two huge army at the sides.

For a moment tens of thousands of men were thrown into the battle, bodies filled the plains and blood flowed like river.

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize how brave and elite the Qin army is. On first contact they had dispersed the enemy's frontlines, killing them so mercilessly that they abandoned their vehicles and escaped. The most fatal blow to the enemy is that their transport vehicles and chariots have now become the stumbling blocks to their escape route and now the Qin archers can come nearer behind their vehicle base and launch a long distance attack while the enemy is still in frenzy.

War drums were heard again.

The Qin's archers now rushed out in a swarm to take over the cavalry who are now retreating back to camp, leaving behind a mess of overturned and burning chariots in their wake and totally disintegrating the enemy's first wave of attacks.

Xiang Shaolong knows that because the other party wants to coordinate the attacks with the surprise troops who will be crossing the river to attack, they will not give up the battle so easily now. Their own wooden barriers and forts

had been destroyed in many places either by the huge rocks thrown at them or burned by the fiery arrows, so he ordered the main force to retreat to the third line of defense.

By now the dense forest on the right is all covered in a fiery blaze, illuminating the whole battlefield with a reddish glow.

After their enemy retreated, the 50,000 to 60,000 enemy soldiers, under the cover of their various protection vehicles, launched a three pronged attack from the left, middle and right. This is the second wave of attack.

The battle thus continued in such heart-stopping situation.

The injured soldiers were constantly carried off the camp and by the time the second line of defense was almost lost, the sun was up. The enemy was too tired to continue and had to retreat.

Jing Shan and the rest returned safely at this point and Xiang Shaolong finally eased his worry.

Reports later came that Jing Shan had waited until after the enemy have built the floating bridges and were crossing it before launching a massive attack to destroy the floating bridges, causing the enemy to lose close to 10,000 men.

The morale of the Qin army soared immediately on hearing this news.

But Xiang Shaolong knows that they are bound to lose and won't be able to last thru this night and gave the orders for men to be retreated in batches.

But he did not forget to put up a show so that the enemy won't see through his plan.

After breakfast, the enemy launched their attacks again. Obviously they are still unaware that the river crossing soldiers had met with mishap.

They braced themselves until dusk and the second line of defense was finally lost. It's now time for the total retreat.

Xiang Shaolong is the last batch to leave. The whole camp was engulfed in flames, even spreading to the nearby hills so that it will make it difficult for the enemy to come after them. Only in such dangerous mountainous terrains can they make use of such methods to block the pursuing soldiers.

The coalition army indeed fell for the trap and ran after them.

Xiang Shaolong set up another second base at the westward roads and put up defenses there and had another round of fierce fighting with the coalition army for another five days until the main force had safely left the area. He then made a detour around the camp and escaped, planting traps and spikes along the way so that the enemy's cavalry will have difficulty running after them in full speed.

They had a few more skirmishes after that, and pretended to be defeated every time. By the time they retreated until Zuicheng, Xiang Shaolong knows that success is already at hand.

Chapter 6

Battle of Zuicheng

Huan Qi came about 30 miles out of the city to receive them.

By now, the mounted troops which were originally made up of 10,000 cavalry and 20,000 backups were now left with a little over 20,000 men. From this it can be seen how intensive the battle chase was along the way.

They left the mountainous area and arrived at the wide open plains on the eastern side of Zuicheng where hills surround them on all sides. The Wei River that leads to the Yellow River is about 50 miles north, flowing from the west to the east. Because of the numerous hills, unless one climbs up to a tall spot, one won't be able to see the grand view of the magnificent river flowing.

From Hangu all the way up north here, it's a distance of 300 miles.

Xiang Shaolong rode alongside Huan Qi as the army moved towards Zuicheng. The former saw that the defenses were done up very well, at the top of all the high points there were forts made from stones and said with satisfaction, "Xiao Qi is really capable. Just looking at the formation shown here will be enough to cause disappointment to Pang Nuan."

Huan Qi was overjoyed to be complimented, "Great General is risking your life at the frontline, how can I just hide here and enjoy my luxuries. Now

Zuicheng has joined the army that had just retreated and the total force is now about 150,000 and everyone has been resting to conserve their energy. They are very clear Great General has now arrived to help them defend Zuicheng and are aware that you are luring the enemy westward to tire them out before giving them a painful blow, so now they're all rubbing their hands in anticipation and are willing to lay down their lives for Great General."

Jing Jun who was behind them had always been very close and open with Huan Qi so he chided jokingly, "So Xiao Qi is so crafty to know how to spread rumors. Luckily these rumors have the effect of boosting morale, otherwise we'll certainly have you punished under martial law."

Everyone laughed.

Huan Qi waved at Zhou Liang, who was behind Xiang Shaolong and complimented, "Brother Zhou has made a great contribution this time. Now everyone in camp is addressing you as God of Eagles and once you're around, no one will have to worry about sneak attacks from the enemy."

Zhou Liang mouth split open into a wide smile as he caressed Eagle King who was on his shoulder and said some humbling words.

Amidst their jokes and conversation, they crossed the drawbridge over the river surrounding the city and went into the city.

The scene immediately gave Xiang Shaolong and the rest a huge shock.

The soldiers and civilians in the city have all gathered at the sides of the main

street as they cheered wildly. It's as if they have already won the battle and returned in pride but in fact, the actual main battle has not even started.

Three days later, the coalition army's vanguards arrived at the eastern plains of Zuicheng.

Huan Qi made use of the fact that they were still tired from the long travel and their weakness in their unfamiliarity with the terrain to launch continuous attacks at them day and night, burning their camps and supplies. The coalition army was forced to retreat more than 20 miles before they could stabilize themselves but by then they have lose close to 10,000 men and the impact to their morale was especially great.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest made use of this time to rest and recover their strength, practicing their formation all day at Zuicheng.

From the Mohist military stratagems, Xiang and Teng chose the formation that is most suited for their enclosed situation, the 'crab formation', which is to abandon the usual way of concentrating their force in the middle upfront but to use 'Frontal Troops', and to concentrate their force on both sides to attack using 'Secondary Troops'.

Because they are fighting with the city behind them, the 'Frontal Troops' can make use of the siege machines and archers situated on the high walls to strengthen their defenses so they're not worried that the enemy will make a frontal full force attack.

As for the secondary troops on either sides, they will be made up of mainly

the best mounted troops and with their thick blades, are most suitable in missions such as this that requires them to use slash and assault tactics.

The enemy came from the west and along the way there are numerous hills so that cumbersome attack vehicles and siege machines will have to be abandoned along the way, reducing the threat to the Qin army. Currently the only factor advantageous to the coalition army is their sheer numbers.

Now it's slowing going into autumn and if the coalition army cannot take over Zuicheng before the arrival of the harsh winter, they will be stuck in an icy situation or maybe even lose the whole army. That's why Xiang Shaolong is not worried that they will set themselves up for a long siege.

So as long as Xiang Shaolong is willing to leave the city to battle, Pang Nuan will only thank the Heaven and hope for a swift battle.

Ten days later, the coalition army moved closer to Zuicheng once again, slowing moving into the wide plains about 50 miles across outside the city of Zuicheng, setting up tents and camps on the side of the mountainous range and using war chariots to for defensive barriers.

Xiang Shaolong gave orders to cease all attacks on the enemy and allow them to stabilize themselves.

But the impending arrival of the great battle is looming over both the enemy and their own men, tightening the nerves of everyone.

Another three days later, all the troops of the coalition army arrived. Xiang

Shaolong and the rest stood on top of the city wall and looked over and on the surface, their enemy indeed looked energetic without a trace of fatigue at all.

Huan Qi looked more intently and after a while, said with a smile, "If we talk about the quality and training of the generals and soldiers, other than the Zhao army, the other four states in the coalition army are far below our standard. This time, General Meng kept getting defeated is due to the many years of fighting between them and Pang Nuan has already become very familiar with his fighting tactics. Therefore he can easily use various methods to target his weaknesses and hence gain victory."

He paused and added, "General Wang Jian once said, looking at all the famed generals of the recent generation, only Bai Qi and Li Mu does not have a set formula in all their battles, nor do they follow any rules so others are unable predict their actions. As for the others, there will always be traces to be found. Now, General Wang should include General Xiang into that list as well."

Xiang Shaolong chided jokingly, "You're really getting better at boot-licking."

Everyone joked and laughed together and the atmosphere relaxed. Teng Yi said, "Although the enemy suffered losses, they still have about 500,000 men left. But I'm not worried about that because all of them still harbor their own intentions and it's not easy for them to work together. Besides the weather, water and terrain here is not advantageous to southern armies like the Chus. We've also blocked their nearby streams with rocks and sand so that it will make lives even more difficult for their tired soldiers. So although they have

500,000 men, we should take into consideration only 200,000 men, which is not far off from our own numbers. However we have solid city walls to protect us and we're not worried about an extended war. The other party will have to hastily launch attacks to make the best use of time, so it's needless to point out who will have the better advantage."

Huan Qi looked far ahead and said, "Messengers are riding towards the left and right from the middle of the enemy camp. Obviously they are going to gather the various leaders to go to the middle army for a discussion. It seems like the enemy is going to launch a full scale attack soon."

Xiang Shaolong had an idea and said nonchalantly, "In my opinion this is just a show put up for us. If I am Pang Nuan and my troops are really strong and energetic with high morale, I will pretend to look tired and listless to lure us out of the city to attack. Now that they are pretending to show how fierce and active they are, it goes to show that they are actually guilty of being afraid that we'll attack them instead."

By this point in time Cheng Jun has already regarded Xiang Shaolong as a general from Heaven and agreed with his comment, "It's also written in military books, 'Whether the soldiers and horses appear brave will determine my victory or weakness. If the formation of an army is neat it instead shows that I will not engage in battle'. Great General's views are indeed wise."

Huan Qi, Teng Yi and Jing Jun's expressions all seemed interested.

Jing Jun immediately requested for permission to engage in battle.

Xiang Shaolong was worried that something will happen to him and ordered Huan Qi to back him up.

An hour later, the city gates opened and both of them, each leading 20,000 foot soldiers and cavalry as well as siege machines crossed over the plains and attacked the enemy formation.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi led another force behind, in case they had to cover their retreat.

They fought until dusk, destroying a few enemy camps before coming back to the city.

The next day it was the enemy's turn to approach for battle but the Qin army refused to come out, their only answer is a rain of arrows and the enemy had no choice but to return.

After three days of such tussles with both sides having casualties, on the fourth morning the coalition army finally lost their patience. Using their newly built siege vehicles, battering rams etc they launched a wide scale attack on the city.

Xiang Shaolong insisted on not moving and waited until the enemy is exhausted and retreating before launching his full force and setting up the prearranged formation outside the city.

Although the coalition army was unwilling to face this battle, they also did not want to miss the opportunity of fighting. Even more so they were afraid

of being flushed by the Qin army so they sent all their troops to set up formation on the other side of the plains as well.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi went up a small hill near the middle of the army to survey the enemy's military formation.

By then the sun has risen high up in the sky and the sun's bright rays reflected off the armors and weapons on men on both sides. The glittering lights filled the plains on both sides, filled with the tense atmosphere of an impending battle.

The coalition army's numbers are visibly lesser, only about 400,000 men split into five main formations.

The main force is concentrated in the middle, with foot soldiers forming the main bulk. In front of them are the chariots, behind them the cavalry, forming a front, middle, back formation.

On the left and right sides were swift cavalry.

The foot soldiers in the middle were further separated into nine small groups according to army type. The three at the foremost were the shield soldiers and light infantry while the other six groups were the main attack force consisting of the heavy armored infantry with about 20,000 men in each group holding defense equipment or weapons for long distance attacks like crossbows, spears, swords, shields, barricades, halberds etc. The space each group takes up and the distance between them fits the rule of military formations and they're definitely not a motley crew.

Teng Yi sighed, "It may be Third Brother's first attempt at leading an army but every time you predict things so accurately. Just like right now we're avoiding the enemy's main force in the middle and splitting our heavy infantry on the two sides, that's indeed a very wise move. Now even if Pang Nuan knows that something is wrong, it'll be difficult for him to change his formation. Besides he doesn't even know that all of our cavalry carries a thick blade that's at least half as formidable as Hundred Battles Blade which will guarantee to place our sword wielding enemy at a great disadvantage."

The battle drums of the enemy suddenly rung out and the almost 3,000 chariots gathered at the front gave a shout and started advancing with the infantry coming right behind them.

It seems that Eagle King, which was perched on Zhou Liang's shoulder, could feel the deadly battle atmosphere in the air and started flapping its wings and gave a low squawk.

Xiang Shaolong gave orders to stay put and the battle drums sounded immediately while the signal soldiers informed Huan Qi and Jing Jun who were on both ends using signal flags.

Just as they were about to approach shooting distance, the first two rows of the 3,000 chariots which was split into six rows suddenly increased speed and rushed forward.

Every chariot, other than the driver and some vehicle personnel, there were also a team of vehicle infantry soldiers, each having their own duties,

The driver will control the vehicle, the vehicle personnel were given weapons like bows, crossbows, spears and halberds. Bows and crossbows will be used while they are still a distance away and spears and halberds will be used in close distance battles. The vehicle infantry will follow the chariots and work closely with the chariot to cover each other in defense and attack to magnify their fatality and defense.

The chariot's driver and vehicle personnel need not walk so they are attired with heavy armor and are not worried about arrows. With the war horses charging, they can really ride roughshod over the battlefield. If they are allowed to break into the formation, the defending troops can forget about maintaining their formations again and if the enemy continues with another wave of attack, they will certainly be doomed.

For a moment shouts and drums were heard on both sides as arrows flew and battle cries filled the air.

The enemy's cavalry on both two sides each sent out about 10,000 men to provide cover for the two sides of the centre attack force.

It's finally the start of the great battle.

Xiang Shaolong waited until the enemy is within shooting distance before ordering the siege engines at the top of the city to be fired.

Huge rocks rained down on the approaching enemy chariots from time to time.

Even as the vehicles overturned and the people fell, there were still close to a hundred chariots still making their way forward.

Xiang Shaolong gave an order and the Qin soldiers at the front line fell back like receding waves, revealing the countless ditches behind which was dug to make the horses fall. The enemy never expected the Qin army to have such a trick and immediately the chariots overturned and the people fell off, giving the Qins the opportunity to finish them off.

Arrows rained down from above the city walls and the foot soldiers who have lost the protection of the chariots all fell to the ground. The scene was so horrible that Xiang Shaolong could not bear watching it but there was nothing he could do.

In war, it's death for either you or me. There's no place for compassion at all.

By now the enemy's cavalry on the two sides have arrived.

Xiang Shaolong ordered the signal soldier to send out the flag signals and their own cavalry charged out from the left and right, each of them holding a broadsword and sliced their way through the sword wielding enemy cavalry, turning them into a mess as they fell off their horses.

The Qin's cavalry have always been better than the eastern soldiers and now that they have a new weapon that is most suited to be used while on a horse, they are virtually unstoppable.

After Xiang Shaolong's army shattered the enemy's first wave of attack, they began to advance about a hundred steps forward towards the enemy's second wave of attacking chariots and foot soldiers. They arranged their formation again and used catapults and arrows for long distance attacks on the enemy.

By now the enemy's cavalry on both sides have lost terribly and the enemy's center army was worried that they will lose their protection cover on the two sides and end up being attacked on three sides so they hurriedly retreated.

However, chariots may be unstoppable when they are charging forward but they are not very easily turned or maneuvered so now that they are hastily reversing right in the middle of battle, the chariots knocked against one another and there was extreme chaos.

But it's not the fault of the coalition army for who would have thought that the cavalry on the two sides would be so utterly defeated so quickly.

Xiang Shaolong knows that the opportunity has arrived and once again gave orders for a full force attack.

Firstly Huan Qi and Jing Jun's 20,000 odd cavalry on both sides were hot on the tails of the defeated enemy, followed by the 60,000 infantry who were behind the cavalry who charged towards the enemy formation on the two sides.

With a center army made up of 40,000 foot soldiers, 10,000 cavalry and 1,000 Wu family warriors, Xiang Shaolong started the attack on the enemy's

center army who were retreating. Their charge left the enemy's corpses everywhere, blood flowed like rivers and the scene was extremely horrifying.

The cavalry on the two sides swiftly broke into the enemy's formation and the coalition army panicked immediately as disruptions washed over them like waves and affected the whole situation.

Pang Nuan knows that something has gone wrong and sounded the drum signals to order the whole army to continue their fight against the enemy but now instead of being actively aggressive they have now become passive participants.

When the coalition army finally looked as if they are successfully keeping the Qin army away, Xiang Shaolong and a thousand Wu family warriors came charging out like tigers falling upon a flock of sheep, absolutely destroying the most formidable center army of the coalition army.

By now it goes without saying that the coalition army has lost and even if Sun Wu were to come back to life or if Bai Qi is here, they will not be able to overturn this outcome. After just an hour, the Chu army started by retreating and this move caused the coalition army to break down and the situation was chaotic.

The coalition army all abandoned their machinery and armor to escape, no longer having the energy to fight back at all.

The Qin army went after them for about 20 odd miles, killing about 80,000 of them and captured about 20,000 men.

Never has the coalition army been defeated so badly in their united effort to attack Qin.

That night, Xiang Shaolong set up camp in the mountains, planning to get a good rest before running after the enemy again the next day so that they can regain whatever land they had lost.

Suddenly his men came to report that they have captured the enemy's Great General.

Xiang Shaolong did not even have time to wear his armor properly and dashed out of the tent to take a look. He was shocked to see a bloody and dirty looking Han Chuang being escorted dejectedly towards the tent. He saw Xiang Shaolong and said with a wry smile, "Brother Xiang, just give me an easy way out."

Xiang Shaolong was startled and shouted, "Untie him immediately!"

His men all treated him with the respect due to a deity and on hearing that, cut off the ropes immediately.

After Xiang Shaolong ordered his men to clean and treat Han Chuang's wounds, he invited him into the tent for a meal.

Han Chang laughed bitterly, "The story of Shaolong's battle will be spread all across the land and your reputation will be on par if not better than Bai Qi. I concede defeat."

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “We each work for different masters, this battle is something beyond all our control. Brother Han may sleep here tonight and you can ride back to your country tomorrow morning.”

Han Chuang was taken aback, “Shaolong, it’s a great crime to release an enemy general without permission, how can I not feel bad about it?”

Xiang Shaolong replied in all earnestly, “I can’t be bothered with this now. I will return your retainers to you as well. Brother Han, you must leave Qin’s borders as soon as possible. With the current situation, we have no choice but to pursue while we’re at an advantage.”

Han Chuang by nature is someone who’s afraid to die and now that he’s had this chance to live, he was overcome with tears of gratitude, “If I have to leave, I might as well go tonight. Ai! Shaolong is a true friend indeed.”

That night Shaolong sent Han Chuang and close to a thousand of his personal retainers away. The next morning, he sent the prisoners of war to Zuicheng and at the same time pursued the retreating enemy as well.

Although Pang Nuan tried to reassemble the coalition army along the way, but because of the low morale and lack of weapons and grains, they were forced to retreat in less than three days. Xiang Shaolong charged in and once again took control of Hangu Pass, totally destroying the dream of the five states to eliminate Qin.

Xiang Shaolong ordered the rebuilding of the pass and strengthen Hangu

Pass's defense ability. After winter, Xiao Pan sent an envoy with an imperial edict that he and Zhu Ji ordered, promoting Xiang Shaolong as Commander-General while the other officials were promoted by another rank. Huan Qi and Cheng Jun were both promoted to Great General while Teng and Jing were promoted to the rank of General. Zhou Liang was promoted to become Deputy General. The others were also rewarded according to the contributions they made. The soldiers were given three times of their pay and at that moment everyone was overjoyed.

Other than Cheng Jun who had to stay behind to guard Hangu Pass, Xiang Shaolong and the rest were summoned back to Xianyang to take over their new posts.

This battle has made Xiang Shaolong famous far and wide, his reputation is now above Wang Jian and Meng Ao and is now regarded together with Wang Jian as Western Qin's two newest and bravest generals.

Chapter 7

Victorious Return

Xiang Shaolong and the rest went up the ships which Xiao Pan sent to them and followed the river back to Xianyang, avoiding the arduous journey of a long road travel.

On the ships that came there were Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi, Zhou Wei and Lu Dan'er, which was a pleasant surprise for Xiang Shaolong, Wu Guo and Jing Jun.

Wu Tingfang, the perfect mother who loves her son more than her own life did not come along because she wants to stay at home with Xiang Bao'er. Naturally the Tian sisters will have to stay behind as well.

All of them happily updated one another of the events that had happened.

During dinner at the dining area of the ship, Xiang Shaolong asked about Qin Qing and Ji Yanran's expression became gloomy as she said, "Lady Huayang just passed away last month and Sister Qing wrote a letter back to say that she wants to observe a mourning period of one year for Lady Huayang and at the same time take care of the family business. She won't be able to return to Xianyang for the time being."

Dan'er, who was being all lovey-dovey with Jing Jun and whispering to him, said smugly, "Third Brother have yet to thank me. This time if not for me who

kept pestering his Highness such that he cannot reject, how can you possibly be hugging Learned Lady Ji on your left and Sister Zhi on your right?”

Everyone saw that although she is already a wife, but she still retains the innocence of a young girl and they all smiled.

Zhou Wei said with a sigh, “Ever since all of you left for war, not only us, but the whole of Xianyang was really worried. The people on the streets all lost their smile, afraid that the coalition army will arrive at our gates. Only when the reports came, the whole city erupted in joy and everyone rushed out to the streets, dancing and singing all night long and constantly cheering his Highness and Master Xiang’s names. They believed that the Black Dragon has protected them, that’s why we have such a miraculous outcome to the war.”

Everyone was proud and touched at the same time.

Lu Dan’er’s focus suddenly turned towards Huan Qi and with the air of an elder sister, commanded, “Xiao Qi, on your return to Xianyang this time, you should settle down and start a family. I’ll make arrangements on this matter, you just have to listen to my instructions.”

Wu Guo chortled, “If you listen to Lady Jing’s suggestion, won’t that be a blind marriage?”

Immediately everyone in the hall roared out in laughter.

As Lu Dan’er was staring angrily at Wu Guo, Ji Yanran said, “We heard that once Lu Buwei received news of your great victory, he lost his appetite for

three days. Three days before we left to come here, he led his people and went to his new house at Donggun. But we suspect he has another ulterior motive, maybe he's gone to see people like Cheng Qiao and Du Bi."

Teng Yi asked, "How's Lu Buwei's relationship with Lao Ai now?"

Lu Dan'er fought to reply, "There's nothing much between the two of them, they even appeared close during Guan Zhongxie and Lu Nianrong's wedding, talking and laughing. But the people under them were having a good time fighting one another. Now the city guards are obviously split into two factions, on one side is Guan Zhongxie and Xu Shang and on the other side is Han Xie. And Xu Shang and Han Xie are fighting over Drunken Wind Loft's Yang Yu, arguing all the time."

She turned towards Xiang Shaolong and said, "Lord Changping instructed me to inform all of you first that he will be arranging another celebratory feast for all of you at Drunken Wind Loft."

Huan Qi was concerned about the reinforcement troops he singlehandedly trained and started asking about the Meng brothers and little Wang Bi's situation.

Zhao Zhi said, "His Highness has promoted Xiao Bi to General and sent him to Dongjiang to support Wang. That Li Mu is really formidable, all of his battles are swift. If not for Commander General Wang who is there to hold the fort, I'm afraid we'd have lost the four counties in the east."

Teng Yi asked about Meng Ao and Ji Yanran sighed, "He fell sick shortly after

he was summoned back to Xianyang. That heartless man Lu Buwei was very cold towards him. Now Lu Buwei is fully supporting Guan Zhongxie, Xu Shang, Zhao Pu and Lian Jiao. Recently he sent Guan Zhongxie and Zhao Pu to attack Han and I heard they even manage to take over a city.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that this is a big headache. After all Lu Buwei does hold power in his hands and now that he is in cahoots with Cheng Qiao and the rest, he'll be even more difficult to deal with. Guan Zhongxie is well versed in both scholarly and martial pursuits, if he turns into another Meng Ao and start to rebel at a later date, there will be even greater trouble.

Everyone chatted for a while longer before returning to their own bunks to rest.

The two ladies happily helped Xiang Shaolong shower and change and when lying on the bed, Ji Yanran said softly, “The dowager went to Yongdu again, accompanying her was Lao Ai and Mao Jiao, can Husband guess what is happening?”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, “She’s expecting again?”

This is her second pregnancy with Lao Ai.

Ji Yanran nodded her head silently when Zhao Zhi plaster herself behind him from the back and said with emotion, “Xiang-lang! We missed you so badly!”

Learned Lady Ji who was in front of him blushed immediately as she gave him a coy look.

What followed after, is of course what everyone knows will happen.

When Xiang Shaolong and the rest were disembarking at the jetty outside Xianyang, the musicians started playing a welcome tune. Xiao Pan, Lord Changping and the other court officials have already been waiting a long time on shore.

On the way back to the Palace, the people filled the streets, cheering and letting off fireworks. Lanterns and banners were hung up in every household and the atmosphere was lively, filled with the Qin people's gratitude and enthusiasm.

The Crown Prince and Xiang Shaolong's name was constantly being chanted.

Under Xiao Pan's lead, all of them went to the temple first to offer their prayers to the ancestors and late rulers of the Qin royal family and at the same time mourn for the warriors who perished in the war. After that, it was announced that a state feast will be held that night where the three armies will be given their rewards.

After that, Xiao Pan had a meeting with Xiang Shaolong at the inner court and with them were Xiao Pan's three other trusted aides, Wang Ling, Li Si and Lord Changping.

By this time, Xiao Pan is 19 years old in name, but in actual fact he is 21 years old. He's already an adult.

Although he is half a head shorter than Xiang Shaolong, but compared to the average person he is already considered well built. Besides, he has wide brows and a solid back, full of self confidence, his eyes deep with unfathomable knowledge. The power and influence that is befitting a ruler can indeed convince one to put down their lives for him.

He was just sitting casually but his imposing aura is enough to make one have the urge to rush forward and throw themselves at his feet.

After everyone congratulated Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan said happily, "So do you prefer me to address you as Grand Tutor or Commander General?"

Everyone roared in laughter.

Xiang Shaolong replied with a laugh, "I think Grand Tutor still sounds much better."

Xiao Pan shook his head and sighed, "Victorious but not proud. I'm afraid Grand Tutor is the only person like this in Great Qin. Grand Tutor's battle have solidified Great Qin's foundation to unify the world and have helped me regained my reputation greatly. Now no one will dare to talk behind my back and said that I've been treating Grand Tutor too well."

Lord Changping smiled, "Lu Buwei has long been making a fuss over his Highness's treatment of Han Chuang but his Highness just replied that 'there's no such thing' and it's enough to hold off Lu Buwei's arguments. If anyone asks about it in future, Shaolong can use the same famous words as an answer."

A warm feeling welled up in Xiang Shaolong's heart.

Xiao Pan said, "This is just a small matter. Even if Han Chuang is released, how capable is he of doing anything substantial. This goes to show that Grand Tutor is not a heartless person like that Lu Buwei. But if you do manage to capture Li Mu in future, Grand Tutor must never release him."

Once Xiang Shaolong thought of the possibility that he will meet the most respected and most fearsome Li Mu on the battlefield, his heart sank.

Wang Ling understands his feelings and said with a smile, "But for now such a situation will not arise. Right now Li Mu is moving his troops to attack Qi. Not only has he fought back the Qi troops who were trying to make use of the opportunity to take over the Zhao people's land, he has also taken down Rao'an which belongs to Qi which gave his King some relief. Li Mu is indeed formidable. As long as this person remains, he will become our greatest obstacle in moving easy."

Li Si said, "This time Shaolong has executed his prowess. Even is Sun Wu is resurrected, he won't be able to win this battle as swiftly and beautifully."

After Xiang Shaolong expressed some humility, he had a thought and said, "Now that your Highness's power and influence has grown so greatly, it's time to summon Wang Jian back."

Lord Changping said, "That is indeed his Highness's intention, that's why he is planning to send the two brothers Meng Wu and Meng Tian to Wei for war.

Once they have the experience, they can take over Wang Jian. But if we act rashly on this matter, this important position which will hold great power over the border soldiers may end up in the hands of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's men."

Xiao Pan lowered his voice, "Meng Ao is very seriously ill now. When I visited him some days ago, he was full of praise for Grand Tutor so it seems that he is indeed sorry."

Xiang Shaolong told them about how Meng Ao had asked him to take care of the Meng brothers.

Xiao Pan got excited, "Once the Dowager returns, I want to appoint Grand Tutor as Marquis. No matter what, Grand Tutor's position cannot be any lower than Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong saw that there are others around and it's inconvenient to raise his objections so he just accepted without much enthusiasm.

In another three years Xiao Pan will be crowned as King. His only hope is that before that day arrives, if he need not to face Li Mu on the battlefield, this is enough to thank the Heavens.

Xiang Shaolong saw that there's another 6 hours before the state feast begins and after he managed to extricate himself, he went back to the Wu residence.

His welcoming neighbors filled the outside of the Wu residence and as soon

as he stepped through the main door, firecrackers were lighted in the square and the whole atmosphere was celebratory.

Wu Yingyuan lead the family our personally to welcome him. He rushed forward to grab Xiang Shaolong's hands and said with emotion, "Our Wu family has finally come out with a famous general whose reputation will shake the earth, I'm so happy that I don't know what to say."

Xiang Bao'er covered his ears and ran into his arms.

After that Wu Tingfang and the Tian sisters also rushed towards him with tears and smiles.

Xiang Shaolong pacified them and hugging his wives and beloved son, went into the house. They first paid respects to the Wu family ancestors, showered and changed before going back to the main hall again to receive the congratulatory wishes from their clansmen.

Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi, Shan Lan, Lu Dan'er and the rest all changed into exquisite gowns to come out and play hosts to friends and family.

Teng Yi, Huan, Zhao Da and the rest have all returned and this added to the atmosphere of joy in the air.

Zhou Liang made great contributions thanks to the Eagle King so now his status in the Wu family is vastly different. The Eagle King also became the main focus of attention, even more than Xiang Shaolong as the children all gathered around it, pointing and expressing their admiration.

Wu Tingfang clung herself to Xiang Shaolong and behaved coquettishly. Although this pretty wife of his is more than 20 years old, but her looks and behavior is still as lively as when they just met when she was a young girl.

Xiang Shaolong found a chance to discuss with Teng Yi, "I plan to suggest to his Highness that I want to resign from the position of Cavalry Commander, so 2nd Brother will have to take care of them in future."

Teng Yi replied with a laugh, "Third Brother should know very well that I am not interested in a career at all. In my opinion, why don't we let Xiao Jun take over, with Wu Guo and Zhao Da supporting him. We can try to promote two more people at the same time."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Then make it Zhou Liang and Wu Yan! The other guards can be rearranged to join the cavalry, they need not follow us back to the farm and live a boring life."

Teng Yi nodded his head in agreement and thus the matter was settled.

By this time Wu Yingyuan had walked over and pulled both of them aside to say, "I just came back from the borders last month. Your sworn brother Wang Jian is indeed a brave general with both wits and courage that even the Xiongnu are not his match at all."

He paused and added, "The Xiongnu have always been running roughshod at the northern borders. Their men, women, old and young are all good at horse riding and archery, vicious and brave. They come and go like the wind

and can take hardship. How would they expect that they'll first be defeated by Li Mu and after that suffer another defeat under your fourth brother. Wu Zhuo is now building a mountainous city around Lake Baikal and the nearby tribes who had often suffered under the Xiongnu have now come forward to seek protection. It's best if we can send a thousand of our family warriors over to strengthen our hold, then we can have more confidence to expand."

Xiang and Teng kept on nodding their agreement and both looked extremely eager about the idea.

Only when one is in his own country and home can one really feel the freedom and happiness.

That night at the Palace, Xiao Pan hosted the celebratory feast and all the citizens in the city were given food and wine.

To Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong's victory in battle felt like his own victory in battle so he was especially satisfied and happy.

Naturally Xiang Shaolong became the focus of the feast as wine cups keep getting topped up. Halfway through the feast he was already so dead drunk that he didn't even know how he managed to leave the place. When he woke up the next day, he realized he was sleeping on the future Emperor Qin's dragon bed. It turned out it was Xiao Pan who insisted on giving him such treatment.

Ji Yanran and the rest all stayed in the Palace as well, waiting for him to wake

up.

When Xiao Pan returned, he had lunch with Xiang Shaolong at the rest and it feels like a close family enjoying bonding time together.

Xiang Shaolong brought up the suggestion of letting Jing Jun become the Cavalry Commander with Wu Guo, Zhou Liang and Zhao Da as the Deputy Commander and Xiao Pan agreed immediately, saying with a smile, “It’s just a mere Cavalry Commander position, and really should not be under Commander General’s portfolio as well.”

Xiang Shaolong again took the chance to bring up the issue of him returning to the farm to spend some relaxing time. Although Xiao Pan was not very willing, he still agreed.

After the meal, Xiang Shaolong went back to the Wu residence with his wives and son and after a nap, woke up feeling refreshed.

Ji Yanran with his pretty wives and the Tian sisters were sitting on the mat chatting away, talking about Xiang Bao’er’s funny antics. The happy atmosphere was enough to melt his heart, giving him a sense of warmth and sweetness.

Compared to the cruelty of war, this is indeed a loving heaven.

The ladies saw that he has woken up and hurriedly helped him up.

Ji Yanran whispered quietly in his ears, “Housekeeper Tu asked to meet you

at the usual place at dusk and Lord Changping have booked a courtyard at Drunken Wind Loft tonight and invited you to the feast. Hai! Doesn't Lord Changping know that after your return, you've yet to have time to stay at home and accompany your wives and children?"

Wu Tingfang, who was at the side, pouted, "If you don't come back tonight, Fang'er will not go up the bed to sleep."

Xiang Shaolong almost had to make a vow that he will come back early before the two ladies were happy again.

A long parting is even more meaningful than a new marriage so when the Tian sisters helped him bath, Xiang Shaolong pulled Wu Tingfang and the rest all into the bath and consoled his wives and concubines with action.

He played with Xiang Bao'er for a little before leaving 'incognito' to meet Tu Xian.

After they met at the secret place, Tu Xian made some small talk before going into the main topic, "Shaolong has managed to show off your prowess and defeated the coalition army and at the same time disrupted Lu Buwei's plans. Now that Meng Ao is seriously ill, he'll have no choice but to change his tactics. Now not only is he in cahoots with Du Bi and the rest, he's also trying to pull Lao Ai to his side and still trying to struggle against imminent death."

He paused and added, "That old thief has totally lost faith with his Highness,

knowing that the day his Highness is crowned King will be the day of his defeat so he'll definitely make a final fight before that day and rebel. We must be on the alert against this."

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, "Now that his Highness's power is growing day by day, Lao Ai won't believe him so easily. What tricks can that Lu thief still be up to?"

Tu Xian sighed, "If there are benefits, there will be collaborations and the problem is that Lao Ai wants to rebel. You must know that Lao Ai is after all an evil and unrepentant hooligan, a scoundrel at heart. Although he has Zhu Ji's favor but in the eyes of the Qins, he's just a lucky servant who manages to jump ranks and don the outfit of a eunuch official. Other than Lu Buwei, who has an ulterior motive, who else would be willing to support him. Under such circumstances, it's not impossible that the two of them will once again collude with each other. Of course their relationship will not last and I think the day that the rebellion is successful will be the day they fall apart."

Xiang Shaolong asked worriedly, "Will Zhu Ji really just sit and watch while Lao Ai topple her own son?"

Tu Xian signed, "Zhu Ji has already sunken in too deeply, besides Lao Ai is especially skilful in handling women. And Zhu Ji's craving for a moment of fun has accidentally resulted in Lao Ai's grow to power, enough for him to form his own cohort. After Shaolong went to war, Lao Ai interfered in all matters big and small his capacity as leader of the court officials, to the extent of addressing himself as 'Foster Father' so one can see his true intentions."

Xiang Shaolong guffawed, “Foster Father? To think that he could think of that. First it was Lu Buwei, then it’s Lao Ai. Don’t they ever think that by riding on the head of the ruler, they might attract death?”

Tu xian signed, “How many people can be like Shaolong who will retreat once mission is accomplished and avoiding the outcome of being a ‘dead rabbit or cooked dog’*. I heard from Mister Tao that the day His Highness is crowned King will be the day all of you will retire to the north. I wonder if you’d be willing to let my clan follow behind you as well?”

* dead rabbit or cooked dog – a Chinese idiom referring to the King of Yue during the Warring States Period. King of Yue is a person whom one can only share hardship with, but never fortune and glory. When he was fighting against Wu, he was very good with his men and formed deep friendship but once they won the war, his attitude changed and those who helped him risk being put to death for minor matters.

Xiang Shaolong replied solemnly, “To be able to ride side by side with you on the great plains of the north would be something that I will absolutely wish for.”

Tu Xian was so touched that he reached out and grabbed his hands, unable to speak at the moment.

Xiang Shaolong asked about Lu Buwei’s situation and Tu Xian replied, “I almost forgot one thing. Two swordsmen from the state of Qi came recently, they are both disciples of Jixia Academy’s Sword Sage, Cao Qiudao. One of them is called Ren Qianli and the other is Fang Yong. They seldom show

themselves and are very secretive. If my guess is correct, they must be skilled fighters sent to Xianyang by Tian Dan under Lu Buwei's request in case there is a need to assassinate Shaolong."

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed, "If that is the case, why would they let Brother Tu find out about their identities?"

Tu Xian chortled, "That's because I have a lot of spies and links, and they overheard the private conversation between them and Xu Shang, and with the facts I was able to guess that Tian Dan is behind this. Now the person Lu and Tian hates most is Shaolong so even if benefits is not a consideration in killing Shaolong, it will at least give them a sense of joy in getting rid of you."

Xiang Shaolong guffawed, "You think there're not enough people who want me dead? Oh right, is that Xu Shang fighting with Han Jie over Yang Yu? Isn't that almost like their version of a continuation of Lu's fight over Meimei?"

Tu Xian gave a cold snort, "What's there to fight over, Lu Buwei have already given strict orders to Xu Shang not to fight with Han Jie, that's how I found out that Lu Buwei intends to collude with Lao Ai. Humph! Ever since that lad became an official, he's getting more and more conceited. Any verbal disagreements and he'll start hitting people and because he has the backing of Lao Ai, even his Highness can't do anything to him. But now Han Jie have lost interest in Yang Yu because a new beauty, who is even prettier than Dan Meimei have arrived at Drunken Wind Loft. This lady can indeed evoke pity from anyone who sees her and she has insisted that she will only sell her craft but not her body so which man would not want to have a taste of her."

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in surprise, “There’s such a thing as selling only the craft but not the body? Who can protect her?”

Tu Xiang replied, “Just based on her name Feng Fei from ‘Dainty Swallow’ alone is enough to ensure her chastity. But she came at a very coincidental time, just three days before Shaolong came back to Xianyang. Now she’s already creating a big stir amongst the officials and royalty and everyone is making a beeline for Drunken Wind Loft now.”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, “Is Brother Tu hinting that she’s here to deal with me?”

Tu Xian sighed, “Feng Fei is the best of the three famed courtesans and very respected amongst the royalty in the various states. She used to be a Princess from Song but for some reason ended up as a courtesan. Rightfully speaking, no one should be able to make her do anything but it doesn’t hurt to be on the alert so Shaolong better be careful. Now Shaolong is the man most wanted dead among the 6 states.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled wryly, “The problem is I’ll be going to Drunken Wind Loft tonight and hopefully my bunch of friends have not picked her to accompany me.”

Tu Xian said with a smile, “If she’s willing to drink with you, then Shaolong should be even more careful because ever since she arrived in Xianyang, she has not agreed to drink with anyone yet.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed ironically before he sighed, “Beauties just have that

kind of mesmerizing power. We men obviously know that they are up to no good but no matter what, we'll always be able to find some good points about them and forget that maybe behind their exterior beauty is an evil heart."

Tu Xian said with a smile, "You'll understand once you see Feng Fei. She definitely is a stunner who possesses both interior and exterior beauty as well as intelligence. Maybe because of the different stands, she will become a manipulative enemy. Luckily Shaolong has always been able to resist beauties so no matter what ulterior motive Feng Fei has, she will not be able to execute them."

After chatting a little longer, the both of them parted.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly have the urge to visit the critically ill Meng Ao but because he had to attend Lord Changping's banquet, he had no choice but to leave this visit until the next day.

Chapter 8

Dainty Beauty

When Xiang Shaolong and his 18 guards arrived at Drunken Wind Loft, Wu Fu came out personally to welcome him and after inviting him into the side hall and asking the servants to leave, he knelt down and kow tow.

Xiang Shaolong is long used to his flunky ways so he stood proudly and asked with exasperation, "Please dispense with ceremony, what are you up to this time?"

Wu Fu stood up in shock and said respectfully, "I wouldn't dare to use trickery in front of Commander General. This time I have important news to report to you."

Xiang Shaolong sat down and said, "Sit down and talk!"

Wu Fu sat down and after looking left and right, as if afraid there's someone in the side halls, he lowered his voice and said, "Lu Buwei is plotting to kill you and Wang Jian."

Xiang Shaolong chortled, "Of course he's thinking about it, but whether he succeeds or not is another matter."

Wu Fu said tactfully, "It was only after a long period of eavesdropping that I managed to string together all the bits of information and found out about

their nefarious plot!”

Xiang Shaolong remembered the metal pipes he used to eavesdrop and asked doubtfully, “Why is Lu Buwei still coming here since Dan Meimei has already become the Empress of Wei?”

Wu Fu said, “That’s what you are unaware of. Half a year ago I spent a fortune in Chu to buy over a great beauty from Yue called Bai Yaya and Lu Buwei is very much enchanted with her so he comes to Drunken Wind Loft regularly. Now Yaya has taken over Meimei’s position to become the head of the four beauties. Hai! Meimei’s departure almost cost me my life, but of course! I would never dare to blame Master Xiang, I do deserve the punishment.”

Xiang Shaolong said with exasperation, “Stop beating around the bush, come straight to the point!”

Wu fu lowered his voice and came closer, “First they are going to deal with General Wang. Because General Wang is battling at the Zhao border, there are many areas which he will need to rely on the support of Du Bi and Cheng Qiao and Lu Buwei is going to make use of Du Bi to sabotage General Wang when he is fighting against Li Mu. The outcome should be expected.”

As Xiang Shaolong is not aware of the situation over that side and so have never expected such a possibility, he paled and asked, “Isn’t Li Mu fighting against the Qi?”

Wu Fu commented, “That could be an evil plan to lure General Wang deeper

into the Zhao border!”

Xiang Shaolong was shocked, “Why didn’t you reveal such an important piece of news earlier, even if I’m not in Xianyang, you can always tell Lord Changping!”

Wu Fu said apologetically, “Well, I only heard bits and pieces of information so I can’t be very sure. Until the day before, Yang Yu told me that Xu Shang was boasting to her that you are going to be very short-lived that my thoughts start to clear up. Xu Shang was saying that your victory in battle this time have planted the seed to your demise in future. Yang Yu was puzzled and asked him further but he only said that no matter how formidable you are, you will not be able to win Li Mu, and he did not elaborate further. That’s why I thought that only if they cause the death of Wang Chi, will you need to meet Li Mu on the battlefield in such a short period of time, that’s why...”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly stood up, “Go and tell Lord Changping that I will be there late.”

He then left hurriedly and went to the Palace to seek an audience with Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan was having fun playing chess with his beloved concubine Wang Meixiu when he saw him arriving in such haste and knew that something urgent has happened. He immediately summoned to meet him in the inner hall.

After Xiang Shaolong expressed Wu Fu's deduction, Xiao Pan's expression changed, "This is indeed an extremely vicious plan. It's obvious that as long as Cheng Qiao is not eliminated, my position will always be shaky."

Xiao Pan then summoned his guard and gave instructions for him to send out a messenger with a swift horse to Shangchuan and warn Wang Chi to be on his alert.

After this matter is settled, the future Emperor Qin said seriously, "If anything untoward happens to Great General Wang, we'll deal with Cheng Qiao and Du Bi immediately and get rid of these thorns in my flesh. By that time I'll want to see how Lu Buwei ends up."

He then smiled and said quietly, "The Crown Princess is expecting!"

Only now did Xiang Shaolong suddenly realize that he has indeed grown up, and congratulated him from the bottom of his heart.

Xiao Pan said worriedly, "Given the opportunity that Lu Buwei and the Dowager are both not in Xianyang, it's best to give the child a good name first so they won't have the chance to change it. What suggestion does Tutor have?"

Xiang Shaolong blurted out, "Then it must be Fu Su."

Xiao Pan looked at him in shock for a few moments and just when Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing himself, this future Emperor Qin nodded his head, "This is quite a unique name. But I'll need a name for a girl as well, so

no matter if it's a boy or girl, there's already a name."

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief, "I only thought of a boy's name, seems that this must be a baby boy so there's no need to think of another girl's name."

Xiao Pan silently mumbled the name Fu Su a few times and said happily, "If it's really a son, then let's call him Fu Su!"

Xiang Shaolong felt a little awkward, knowing that he has influenced history with his own knowledge of history. He took the opportunity to take his leave and by the time he rushed to Drunken Wind Loft, he's already more than an hour late.

Besides Lord Changping and his brother, Li Si, Huan Qi, Jing Jun, Wang Ling, Wu Guo, Zhou Liang etc, he did not expect to see Wang Wan, Cai Ze, Ying Ao and Ying Lou as well and obviously these people have leaned towards Xiao Pan's political faction. Teng Yi came only for a while because he wanted to spend time with his wife and child.

Yang Yu, Gui Yan and Bai Lei were all there with the prettier ladies of Drunken Wind Loft, providing one to one service, with each lady attending to a person and the atmosphere was lively.

Xiang Shaolong was given the seat at the head of the table and the Yue beauty Bai Yaya have been waiting a long time for him to arrive. This lady was dressed in Chu garb, about 18 years old and indeed very pretty, comparable to Dan Meimei. Not only is she refined but most enchantingly, she is very

gentle, her pretty eyes filled with intense feelings. Her voice is sweet and soft and indeed she is a rare treasure. No wonder Wu Fu can use her to handle Lu Buwei, who had suffered the loss of Dan Meimei.

But when he thought of how ultimately, her fate may end up to become Lu Buwei's concubine, he felt sad.

Before Xiang Shaolong could even warm his seat, he was made to drink 3 cups of wine as punishment and raised his arms in surrender, "If I go on drinking, I'm afraid I'll have to be carried out immediately. Everyone, please have mercy on me and let me off this time!"

Wang Wan laughed, "Last night Lord Xiang only collapsed after drinking more than 20 cups, so tonight you must at least drink another 7 cups before we forgive you for coming late."

Just as they were arguing, Bai Yaya smiled delicately and said, "Then let Yaya drink a few cups of punishment wine in Great General's place."

Everyone shouted their agreement.

Cai Ze said with a smile, "But this punishment wine must first go into Great General's mouth first before our Yaya can drink on his behalf.

There was another uproar of agreement.

Bai Yaya whined as she fell into Xiang Shaolong's arms, her pretty eyes half-closed and her sweet face blushing, like a little bird leaning towards him.

Although Xiang Shaolong has long gotten used to such lascivious styles in this Warring States Period but because this youthful beauty is so hot and fresh, he felt excited and making use of his slightly intoxicated stage and the cheers of everyone, he enjoyed her fragrant lips thoroughly.

Only then did they let him off.

Ying Ao said with a smile, “I heard that after Pang Nuan lost in the war, the other states in the coalition army all berated him for being careless and stretching himself too far and lost this great opportunity to defeat us Qins and now his reputation is in tatters. Seems that it will be quite impossible for them to come together again.”

Ying Lou added, “After the defeat, everyone is trying to push the blame to others. At the battle of Zuicheng this time, the ones who left the earliest were the Chus, so now they’ve become the target of blame for the others and everyone is very unhappy. The five states will be on bad terms for quite some time.”

Li Si clapped his hands, “Tonight we will only speak of enjoyment and not business. The Dainty Swallow Dance which was prepared for Shaolong should be able to start now!”

Lord Changping made an eye signal at Wu Fu, who was seated at the end of the table and the latter hurriedly left to make arrangements.

Jing Jun said with a laugh, “Just by seeing how our Lord Minister of Justice is

even more nervous than Third Brother, we know how attractive Feng Fei can be!”

Everyone expressed their agreement and Li Si, who seldom steps into such places of entertainment, became extremely embarrassed.

Xiang Shaolong was totally relaxed as he enjoyed the feeling of camaraderie among them.

Bai Yaya leaned closer and whispered in his ears, “Master Xiang did not harbor grudges and helped Miss Meimei become her Queen of Wei, all the sisters in Drunken Wind Loft are extremely grateful.”

Xiang Shaolong lowered his voice to ask, “So won’t whole city learn of this matter.”

Bai Yaya said with a smile, “This is called good news travel far! Now Master Xiang just have to crook your fingers and everyone will come running to help Master Xiang spend the night!”

Of course Xiang Shaolong did not believe her because at least Guiyan alone hates him to the core.

Bai Yaya looked at him coquettishly and asked shyly, “I wonder if Yaya would be able to receive Master Xiang’s attention?”

Xiang Shaolong saw that she was entirely bewitching and the fatal point is that she is so graceful that he can’t help but feel a surge of lust and said

quietly, “Not tonight, let me see when!” Bai Yaya breathed out softly into his ear as she nibbled his lobes and said, “Daytime is fine as well, then Master Xiang’s wives won’t find out.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of his dedicated wives at home and immediately awoke from the haze. He was about to tactfully reject her when Wu Fu came in with a look of helplessness, attracting everyone’s attention.

Lord Changping knows that something has gone wrong and asked, “Is the beauty blaming us for being late?”

Wu Fu replied bitterly, “Seems like that’s the case. Miss Fei have returned to her quarters to sleep and no matter what good words I say, it’s of no use.”

Strangely not only is everyone not feeling that she’s throwing airs, but they think that what she has done is very reasonable indeed.

Lord Changwen smiled, “Shaolong’s the one who caused all this trouble and offended our dainty beauty. I suggest that Shaolong should go apologize and pacify her back here.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed, “What?”

For some reason Li Si was especially excited and he actually agreed, “The dainty beauty will be going to Wei the day after, Shaolong you better go quick and think of a way.”

Huan Qi asked in surprise, “Are you people actually here to congratulate

Great General Xiang or to see the dainty beauty?”

Lord Changping and the rest all roared out in laughter. The situation was chaotic but very interested as well.

Xiang Shaolong’s curiosity was piqued and he reluctantly stood up and sighed, “I will try my best but if I get thrown back here, all of you must not blame me.”

Amidst thunderous applause, Xiang Shaolong followed Wu Fu out but he had only taken a few steps when Jing Jun, Wu Guo and Lord Wenchang ran out after him, saying that they want to see what happens from the door.

Xiang Shaolong was influenced by the playful atmosphere and gathered up the valor he had when he was fighting and creating trouble during the 21st century and led the three of them, with Wu Fu leading the way, towards the buildings at the back.

In a quiet corner at the back yard of Drunken Wind Loft, next to the pond there was a small wooden cottage, looking very antique and exquisite with the fragrance of flowers surrounding it.

Wu Fu said, “That’s where Feng Fei lives. Her personal maid is very fierce, she was the one who kept me out earlier.”

Jing Jun was taken aback, “Doesn’t she know you’re the boss? How dare she be so rude to you.”

Wu Fu replied, "She's specially invited by the Crown Princess to perform at the Dowager's birthday feast, would I dare to offend them?"

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand what's happening and he was slightly less worried. He gave a dry cough and said, "Watch me!"

He had just taken a step when Lord Wenchang pulled him back with a reminder, "I heard that Feng Fei is as light as a swallow, and she is quite skilled so Great General better not let her kick you into the pond."

The three of them laughed over his misfortune at the same time, their attitude extremely irritating.

Xiang Shaolong cursed silently, swept Lord Wenchang aside and walked towards the cottage with his chest puffed up.

The wooden door opened easily as he pushed but the lower level of the cottage was quiet with no one around. Xiang Shaolong took a look around and saw the stairs leading up to the second level so he took a deep breath to steady his nerves before going up the stairs.

The wooden steps creaked under his feet and the sound can indeed make one nervous.

A clear, crisp voice came from above, "Who's that?"

Xiang Shaolong did not answer deliberately and when he reached the second level, a handsome looking young boy lifted the curtain to the room and

walked right into him.

Both of them were equally shocked.

Xiang Shaolong did not expect himself to knock into a pretty boy instead of a pretty maid, while the other party did not expect a strange man to find his way upstairs.

Xiang Shaolong took a quick glance inside but because the door curtains were dense and heavy, naturally he could not see anything at all.

The thought of it is quite funny.

In the short span of two years, he had met with three famed courtesans and at least one of them tried to take his life. And then they left.

The Spring-Autumn Warring States period is indeed a unique, splendid and very uninhibited era. Even though everyone is constantly at war but amidst the partings and reunions, the Qi people can go to Wei, the Wei people can enter Qin, the Yan people comes down south while the Chu people went up north, selling their skills in exchange for fame and fortune or travelling and expounding their studies and theories. Everyone is fighting for a chance to shine, like thousands of flowers blooming at the same time.

A world famous courtesan like Feng Fei has superseded the fights amongst the states. No matter where she goes, she is well respected and can throw tantrums whenever she likes, put on airs whenever she likes. If he had not seen it with his own eyes, it'll really be very difficult to imagine.

The Three Famed Courtesans came one after another to Xianyang and this goes to show that Xianyang has become one of the center of the arts in the world and that's what attracted them here because of various reasons.

Just as he was pondering, the handsome young boy shouted angrily, "Who are you, how dare you barge into a lady's private chambers?"

Xiang Shaolong saw that 'he' is guarding outside the door with such hostility so he replied with a slight smile, "I am Xiang Shaolong and I've come especially to seek forgiveness with Miss Feng."

There was no response from inside at all.

Xiang Shaolong had expected her to put on airs so he was not embarrassed. He took two steps towards the pretty boy and was almost face to face with her.

The pretty boy's nose and forehead creased at the same time, as if afraid that Xiang Shaolong would have body odor but he did not scold him at all, for example, scolding him for being rude. The pretty face looks almost displeased but not yet, and is extremely alluring.

Xiang Shaolong's heart lurched and he said quietly, "If young lady would make way, I'll go in to see Miss Feng but if young lady disallows, I have no choice but to leave immediately."

He deliberately lifted his voice so that Feng Fei who is inside can hear

everything clearly.

The pretty kid is obviously not Xiang Shaolong's match and was totally at a loss, not knowing how to deal with him.

A gentle, sweet lady's voice rang out from within the room, "Little Sister, please let Lord Xiang come in for a talk!"

The pretty kid called out in acknowledgement and lowered her head as she stood aside, giving him access to the room.

Xiang Shaolong gave a smile in reply before stepping over the ledge and lifting the curtains into the room.

He did not expect the hall inside to be even wider and bigger than the outer hall. There were windows on three sides and on the left, a bamboo curtain segregated the living quarters where the bed is placed.

Feng Fei was seated on the floor, leaning on a soft pillow with a long table in front of her with a five-stringed zither on it. She looked as if she's elegant, rapturous and warmly comfortable.

The leader of the Three Famed Courtesans lifted her melon-seed shaped face and looked towards him, her jewel like bright eyes matched with her fair and pinkish skin exuding an attractive aura which seems to come from within her made Xiang Shaolong's eyes brighten.

But what is most attractive about her is her air of heartrending gracefulness,

which anyone would take pity on upon seeing her. This made him think of Li Yanyan who is far away within the Chu borders.

Any man who shows concern and protection of ladies will not bear to hurt her.

Just by sitting there casually, she has already displayed the most attractive and alluring pose a woman can make to perfection. Her dainty and striking body makes one have the urge to press her down with one's body, no wonder even Tu Xian is extremely interested in her as well.

Her ability to enchant men is indeed better than Shi Sufang and Lan Gongnuan.

Just as the two of them were measuring up each other, the little girl outside who was disguised as a boy called out, "Missy! Do you want tea or wine?"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, "It's all right, I'm here especially to apologize to Miss and wouldn't dare to disturb your tranquility."

Feng Fei guffawed, "Tranquility? Living in a mundane world, how can there be tranquility? Lord Xiang, please take a seat. Lass, prepare tea for our guest."

When Xiang Shaolong sat down, he suppressed the urge to give her the once over and just looked straight ahead. Just as he was about to speak, Feng Fei asked gently, "It's not like Lord Xiang's style to come and apologize, I wonder if you were coerced or did you come willingly?"

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "It's the first time I met Miss, but why do you seem so knowledgeable about me?"

Feng Fei smiled and replied slowly, "Xiang Shaolong is the most talked about person amongst the powerful circles in all six states, I've heard so many things about you. Besides, before I came to Qin I've heard of Lady Meimei of Wei speak of you, so of course I should have an impression of you!"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, "Miss Feng deliberately refused to perform this time, is it because.... Hai! Is it because..."

Feng Fei seemed very interested as she encouraged him, "Why are you hesitating? Just speak your mind."

Xiang Shaolong said wryly, "I wanted to ask if this is a deliberate trick by Miss to make me come here to see you but I'm afraid my frankness will shock you, that's why I was hesitating. You must find this a joke."

Feng Fei let out a tinkling laughter, her mesmerizing eyes glanced at him as she lifted her slender left hand and lowered her head to look at the shiny and exquisite silver ring at her little finger, saying gently, "Lord Xiang's guess is correct but I'm afraid you did not expect that Feng Fei is up to no good this time. This silver ring is made by a talented smith from Wei and can shoot out poisoned needles, injecting poisoned liquid into a person's body. If it's shot at the right position, the person shot will die very swiftly of poison."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "If that's the case, why is Miss Feng telling

me that?"

Feng Fei took off the ring nonchalantly and threw it down on the ground and said tenderly, "Because I've changed my mind! Until I came to Qin and saw Ying Zheng did I understand why all these talented people like Shang Yang, Gongsun Yan, Zhang yi, Gan Mao, Lou Huan, Fan Wei, Cai Ze, Li Si, Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong were willing to work under the Qin royalty. Even though Zhao has Li Mu and Lian Po but they still lost battle after battle and Lord Xinling have to end up committing suicide by drinking poisoned wine. The Hans are idling in their own state, the Yans think too highly of themselves, the Qis are just all talk while the Chus are engrossed in enjoyment. The 6 eastern states have lost their power so why should I become the bad guy in vain and end up losing my life as well?"

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to say something so intellectual and shook his head and sighed, "Miss Feng is indeed a rare lady. But I still do not understand why Miss Feng is so frank. If you do not disclose this, no one would know about this matter."

Feng Fei said happily, "You silly, because I've taken a liking to you! That's why I'm reminding you. Now Lord Xiang is the person that the all the eastern 6 states would like to kill the most. So you must not trust anyone, including those friends whom you have once helped in the past."

Xiang Shaolong looked at her in shock, unable to speak for now.

Feng Fei covered her mouth and laughed, "Please do not misunderstand, taken a liking to you does not equal to giving you my heart. It's just that I feel

that you're truly a hero who deserves your good reputation and it'll be very difficult for me to forget you in future. That's all."

Xiang Shaolong immediately heaved a sigh of relief, yet at the same time felt a little dejected. This Feng Fei is even more unfathomable than Shi Sufang.

Feng Fei looked outside the window and said gently, "It's late! Unless Lord Xiang wants me to accompany you to bed, otherwise I will have to go into dreamland and search for the beautiful dream that I cannot find in real life. I'll be leaving Qin early tomorrow morning."

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to blurt out and ask her to stay so that he will not miss this opportunity that he may regret for the rest of his life but when he thought of his dutiful wives at home, he had no choice but to stand up and take his leave.

Li Si will have to be disappointed tonight.

He had just walked down the stairs when Jing Jun rushed in and said, "Meng Ao has passed away!"

Chapter 9

Delicate Trap

After Meng Ao's funeral, Jing Jun was officially promoted to become the Commander of the Cavalry. As he had married into the Lu family, all the important officials in the military gave their utmost support on Lord Lu's account.

Wu Guo, Zhao Da and Zhou Liang became his deputies so now the cavalry is now a unit totally under the Crown Prince's control, unlike the city troops who are under the control of the two factions headed by Lu Buwei and Lao Ai, fighting against each other.

Of course, if Lu and Lao works together, it'll be another matter altogether.

Because of Xiao Pan's acknowledgement of their abilities, the 18 Warriors became the leaders of his personal guards so their status are greatly raised too.

Huan Qi is still in charge of training the reinforcement troops while Meng Wu and Meng Tian will immediately lead troops to attack Wei once they have settled their father's funeral arrangements to take revenge against the Weis for joining the coalition army.

Basically, Qin is still using the same strategy of attacking the nearby states while maintaining good relations with the states further away, which is to

pacify Chu, Qi and Yan and only lead troops against the other 3 states.

Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to take a break and went back to the farm with Teng Yi's family as well. He practices his swordplay, archery and riding skills daily, and will tour around the scenic places when idle, living a carefree life playing with his son.

Spring left and summer came. On this day he returned to the courtyard and received a letter that Qin Qing sent a messenger to deliver.

It turns out that this pretty lady have decided on a return date, and will come back to Xianyang early autumn. Although she did not mention a word about her feelings in the letter, but her fiery love can be felt without the use of words and from this it shows how refined this beauty is, which makes a boor like Xiang Shaolong love and respect her even more.

Tao Fang regularly brings news to the farm as well.

Lu Buwei returned to Xianyang, and after that went to Bashu again, something which no one can seem to understand.

Lao Ai and the Dowager Zhu Ji has returned to Xianyang. Lao Ai's attitude is even more conceited now, not even taking into regard Lord Changping, Wang Ling and the rest of the senior officials. He'll bring up Zhu Ji's name in every matter and Xiao Pan had no choice but to tolerate him bitterly.

Guan Zhongxie won a few battles in Han and was promoted to Great General, slowly taking over Meng Ao's position.

But of course his reputation and power is still far beneath.

Meng Wu and his brother had a few swift battles in Wei, taking down Zhaoge and their reputation increased, becoming the new stars of the next generation of generals.

The thing that Xiang Shaolong was most worried about is that Wang He has indeed fallen into a trap. He took the opportunity when Li Mu moved his troops to attack Qi to sent his men to attack the Zhaos. Xiang Shaolong can only hope that the messenger Xiao Pan sent out can give the warning to Wang He in time, otherwise he'll be sandwiched by enemies and his situation will be extremely dangerous.

Just as he was worrying about all these, bad news came at the end of May. Wang He was bitterly defeated by Li Mu and died in battle. Wang Bi and Yang Rui led the remaining defeated troops back to Shangchuan.

The thing that Xiang Shaolong most wanted to avoid has finally happened.

Lu Buwei's nefarious plot has once again succeeded.

And Xiang Shaolong's happy and carefree life will soon come to an end.

By the time Xiang Shaolong returned to the palace in Xianyang on swift horses, he could feel a cloud of gloom over the place.

Ever since Lord Xinling led the coalition army outside Handan 16 years ago

and greatly defeated the Qin army, the Qins have never experienced a situation whereby a great general with the status of Wang He would actually die in battle. The enormity of the setback this time really cannot be calculated.

By the time Xiang Shaolong arrived at the library, Wang Ling, Li Si, Lord Changping, Lao Ai, Wang Guan, Cai Ze and the other senior officials were already outside the door waiting for Xiao Pan to summon them.

Wang Ling's eyes were red and he looked as if he has aged in years. For the first time Xiang Shaolong could clearly feel that he is getting on in age, something that he has never felt before in the past and this made him very uncomfortable.

He came towards Xiang Shaolong and said quietly, "His Highness refused to see us, he only said to wait until you come. I think you'd better go in and see him first before summoning us in!"

Lao Ai was obviously eavesdropping at the side and said in pique, "This is the time where everyone should have a good discussion. How can his Highness lock himself up, let me go in together with Shaolong."

A look of ire was seen on everyone's face.

Xiang Shaolong patted Lao Ai and said somberly, "Let me go in first and find out what's happening on everyone's behalf! His Highness is feeling exactly what we are feeling right now, so everyone should sympathize."

No matter how imperious Lao Ai is, he will not dare to offend Xiang Shaolong for now so he gave up the idea and said, "We will wait here then! But the Dowager should be here soon as well."

Xiang Shaolong was disgusted to hear him bringing out Zhu Ji's name in less than a few sentences and went into the library.

Xiao Pan was looking out the window with his back to the door, not moving at all.

Before Xiang Shaolong could speak, Xiao Pan said calmly, "Our men got there a step too late, and the fiend's nefarious plan succeeded."

Xiang Shaolong did not expect that not only is Xiao Pan not showing any sign of sadness at all, he is even calmer than normal and was struck speechless at that moment.

Xiao Pan turned around and said with a slight smile, "I've just given orders for Cheng Qiao and Du Bi to lead an army and attack immediately. You can tell them later when you go out that I am suddenly taken ill because of my distraught over Wang Chi's death. That Lao Ai will certainly send Mao Jiao here on pretense of treating my illness to check if it's true. We can then make use of Mao Jiao's mouth to trick Lao Ai."

Xiang Shaolong asked in shock, "Is Lu Buwei and Lao Ai really collaborating?"

This is something that has never been mentioned in history books!

Xiao Pan said with a frosty smile, “The Dowager wants me to appoint Lao Ai as the Marquis of Changxin, to be on the same status as Lu Buwei and Lu Buwei did not raise objections at all. So what do you think has happened?”

He paused and added, “Time and again I’ve wanted to summon Wang Jian back but Lu Buwei and Lao Ai joined forces to stop me. Without the Dowager’s permission, there’s nothing that I, as the ruler, is allowed to do. Now our troops are all tied up fighting in the other 3 states. Other than the three main armies in Xianyang, we’re only left with the reinforcement troops and the total manpower is only about 120,000 men, totally powerless to mount a military expedition against Cheng Qiao and Du Bi. So I can only feign illness to lure them here to attack and let Teacher take care of them. Other than this, there’s really no other way.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “Your Highness have indeed grown up.”

Xiao Pan looked heavenward and sighed, “Ever since Mother was killed, circumstances forced me to do all these. There will be no mercy or reason to speak of.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed together with him and left the library. When everyone started surrounding him, Xiang Shaolong exclaimed, “His Highness has taken ill!”

Xiao Pan’s ‘illness’ lasted three whole months and the morning court sessions was handled by Zhu Ji.

Xiang Shaolong and Huan Qi stepped up on the conscription efforts and

increased the numbers of the reinforcement troops to 50,000 men and spent their days training the soldiers outside the city. They also imagined the route that Cheng Qiao would take and strengthened the defenses and communication along the route.

By the time the snow melted, news have arrived that once Cheng Qiao heard that his 'elder brother' was taken seriously ill, not only did he disobey orders to attack Shangtang but tried to strike a deal with the Zhaos, asking Du Bi to gather 150,000 men to quietly avoid the cities along the way and go straight at Xianyang.

Cheng Qiao's rebel troops took the boats and arrived at the north of Xianyang first before sneaking their way to Xianyang.

Xiang Shaolong has been keeping a close watch on their activities and transferred 20,000 cavalry in the night, together with 50,000 reinforcement troops and set up a trap at an ideal, prearranged location for Cheng Qiao's army.

On top of that he let out fake information that Xianyang's troops have gone to Zuicheng for military practice.

Therefore when news of Cheng Qiao's army approaching emerged, the whole of Xianyang was alarmed.

At this time Xiao Pan really needs to lie down in bed and only a few trusted aides like Lord Changping, Li Si etc knows what is truly happening.

Lao Ai and Zhu Ji were obviously at a loss. This obviously means that they are not aware that Cheng Qiao and Du Bi will raise an army and rebel openly.

Lu Buwei is still hiding at Bashu, so that others will not know what he is up to but no matter what, it won't be anything good.

The chaos in Xianyang will naturally be relayed to Cheng Qiao and Du Bi by spies so that it will make them belittle their opponents and grow careless.

It's difficult to blame them, who would have guessed that the future Emperor Qin would know 4 months ago that they will rebel?

Dealing with a veteran general like Du Bi, it's impossible to set up an ambush anywhere. Because he'll certainly have vanguards to ensure that the roads ahead are safe before the main military force will follow behind.

But Xiang Shaolong also has his own brilliant strategy.

He split his army into half, with Huan Qi and Jing Jun leading 20,000 men and hiding at a secret location outside Xianyang city.

He and Teng Yi will lead the remaining 50,000 elite troops and hide somewhere far away in a dense forest, away from the route that Cheng Qiao's army will take and quietly wait for their prey to arrive.

The weather is good this day. Cheng Qiao's vanguards arrived about 100 miles north of Xianyang city and because they heard news that the defending troops won't be leaving the gates to meet the enemy but will only try to

defend the city to their deaths, Cheng Qiao and Du Bi did not especially fortify their defenses.

At this point in time Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were amongst some bushes about 5 miles away at the top of the hill, looking at the enemy troops snaking through the valleys magnificently.

Teng Yi said with a laugh, "If Lu Buwei knows that Cheng Qiao is now rallying his forces to attack under the excuse of 'Eliminating Lu and Lao to save his Imperial Brother', he'll definitely be so incensed that he'll vomit blood and die."

Xiang Shaolong took a careful look at the magnificent and tidy forces with the brightly polished armor and banners fluttering in the wind. He shook his head and said, "I think Lu Buwei has already guessed that Cheng Qiao is immature. That's why he is deliberately making use of Cheng Qiao's hands to eliminate his Highness and us, and to get rid of Lao Ai and the Dowager. Then he can summon the two big armies led by Guan Zhongxie and the Meng brothers and get rid of Cheng Qiao and Du Bi. By then he can take the throne for himself."

Teng Yi guffawed, "Third Brother really knows this conniving thief well but when it comes to trickery, other than Third Brother, no one else is his match."

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, "But this time it's more accurate to say that Lu Buwei is not his Highness's match."

Teng Yi sighed, “He’s finally grown up.”

At this time Zhou Liang came with Eagle King to report that the enemy’s backup force is finally passing by.

Xiang Shaolong knows that the time has come and on his command, all the riders moved out and making use of the cover of the dense forest, flowed closely on the tail of the enemy troops.

Their plan is very precise. When the enemy is resting and starting to build the fire to cook, this will be the time for them to surround them.

Cheng Qiao’s main force indeed was not worried about the enemy attacking and actually set up camp at a hill where the official road to Xianyang goes past. On both sides, there were tall and dense trees and the tents of 50,000 men filled up the entire hill.

Before they have a chance to place a scout at the tallest point, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi’s 50,000 elite troops have already arrived silently through the forest.

Xiang Shaolong is after all someone who has undergone strict military training and knows that in such a situation, there is no place for mercy at all. He hardened his heart and gave orders to eliminate all enemies and while there’s still a little light from the setting sun, thoroughly surrounded the enemy’s 50,000 men and waited for the chance to attack.

As the eastern sky started to turn bright, the enemy soldiers started to wake

up and move around. They were talking and joking loudly as they prepared to cook breakfast.

Xiang Shaolong gave the command and the drums started beating as 50,000 elite cavalry charged out of the dense forest and launched a full force attack.

This has turned into a massacre where the enemy had no chance to retaliate at all.

The enemy soldiers threw down their rice bowls and did not even have time to get their horses before trying to escape on their own.

After a few charges, the backup enemy force has totally disintegrated as all of them are running around on barefoot trying to save their own lives.

The defeat of the backup troops immediately impacted on the nearly 90,000 main force. They were about to turn back and give support when Huan Qi and Jing Jun, each leading 10,000 elite cavalry sandwiched them from the left and right. Cheng Qiao's army was being attacked from the front and back and they were totally flabbergasted.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi came upon them forcefully from the back and with just a single charge, Cheng Qiao's army was immediately thrown into a crazy and chaotic situation.

Cheng Qiao and Du Bi have now become public enemy, as thousands of soldiers surrounded them.

Xiang Shaolong, holding his Hundred Battles Blade, led the way as he charged into the enemy's formation and personally killed Du Bi. At the same time he followed Xiao Pan's orders and dealt with Cheng Qiao on the spot, getting rid of this source of trouble.

In this battle, only about 10,000 odd of Xiang Shaolong's men were injured or dead and can be considered an extremely outstanding battle outcome.

About 40,000 of Cheng Qiao's rebel soldiers were killed while the remaining 80,000 who did not manage to escape all surrendered.

Xiang Shaolong waited until the next morning before ordering his men to send the report to Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan was ecstatic as he personally led his men to come and commend the army.

That night he stayed in Xiang Shaolong's Commander's tent.

After dinner, Xiao Pan was in a good mood and climbed up with everyone to the high point to admire the magnificent and mysterious scenery of the wilderness under the moonlight.

This future Emperor Qin was especially elated and asked with a laugh, "Who will help me exterminate Pu Hu's faction?"

As soon as Xiang Shaolong heard the word 'exterminate', he thought of Shan Rou who is far away in Qi, his heart shuddered and he dared not reply at all.

Jing Jun, Teng Yi and Huan Qi regarded Xiang Shaolong as their leader and since he did not say anything, they maintained their silence as well.

Wang Ling took a step forward and answered with a cold snort, "Leave this matter to me then!"

Everyone, including Xiao Pan, was taken aback.

Because of his grief over Wang He's death, Wang Ling's health has been extremely bad and just the torturous journey of following the army may prove too strenuous for him.

Besides, Pu Hu's remaining power is still very considerable and he will never sit still and be captured. On top of that, he is very close to the Zhaos, so this matter may look very easy on the surface but in fact it's very difficult.

Wang Ling have not led an army for many years and now he is asking for permission to go is prove of his determination to avenge Wang He.

Xiao Pan greatly regretted his words but now that Wang Ling has made the request, if he rejects it will mean that he finds him too old for such a task and that, to a Qin, is the greatest humiliation.

Xiao Pan had no choice but pretend to be elated and said, "Then I will appoint Great General Wang as the Commander with General Huan Qi as the Deputy Commander. Both of you will leave as soon as possible."

Wang Ling and Huan Qi hurriedly knelt down to receive the imperial edict.

Xiao Pan said solemnly, “The success or failure of this battle will depend on speed, and catch Pu Hu totally unaware. Otherwise if we allow him to stay safely behind Dunliu City, and with the Zhaos backing him up, this matter will prove extremely difficult.”

Everyone nodded their heads in agreement.

More and more, Xiang Shaolong is beginning to feel this future Emperor Qin’s superior talent and stratagem. And he is better than him in the way that he cares only about the outcome and will never be concerned about feelings or loyalty. Only a hard-hearted person like this will be able to become the world’s most fearsome leader in this warring states era.

They returned to the tent and Xiao Pan looked for Xiang Shaolong for a private discussion.

Xiao Pan said with a wry smile, “I’m very worried about Wang Ling, afraid that he won’t be able to survive the hardship of a military campaign.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he feeling a little peeved that he had not volunteered first and replied with a sigh, “What do you want me to do?”

Xiao Pan sighed, “I can blame anyone, but I will never dare to blame Teacher. Before I rode here, I did think of the idea of eliminating Lu and Lao’s factions totally once I return to the capital. When Lu Buwei comes back, he will be executed immediately right outside the city gates and get it over and done

with. Does Teacher think this plan is workable?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "This is a dangerous move. Firstly we have no excuse to do this, and Lu and Lao's factions are too big and strong. Just their family warriors added up makes up almost 20,000 men and there's absolutely a lot of people to get rid of. Besides Guan Zhongxie is still outside with his army and the city troops are under their command. On top of that we have that problematic Pu Hu. Our military power in Xianyang will be even more stretched out. Your Highness, you must reconsider."

Xiao Pan was vexed, "I know as well that this is not the best time, but do I have to wait until after the coronation before I can strike? Now I find that waiting another two more days is already too long a wait, not to mention another two years."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Those who wants to achieve big things must learn tolerance. If Lu Buwei hears any rumors on this, with his influence and tricks, maybe he will be able to encourage Bashu to rebel and that is certainly not a good thing for Great Qin. Besides, he should already be well prepared by now, so that he can fight for the throne with Cheng Qiao once Cheng Qiao's uprising is successful. If we choose this time to strike, Qin will be thrown into chaos."

Xiao Pan nodded his head in agreement and said after a moment's silence, "How can we summon Wang Jian back?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "It'll be just before your Highness's coronation ceremony! By then your Highness will soon have absolute power and no one

will dare question your orders. By then, you can just give a secret imperial edict and this matter will be accomplished.”

An icy cold light flashed past Xiao Pan’s eyes as he said, “We’ll do just that. I want those conniving thieves to be caught unaware when Wang Jian returns and by then I’ll make sure they get their comeuppance.”

Xiang Shaolong was silent for a moment before he suddenly said in a low voice, “Xiao Pan! I want you to promise Xiang Shaolong one thing.”

Xiao Pan’s body trembled. Ever since they came to Qin, this is the first time that Xiang Shaolong called him Xiao Pan, and addressed himself as Xiang Shaolong.

His eyes filled with deep feelings, Xiao Pan nodded his head, “Teacher, please speak, Xiao Pan is listening.”

Xiang Shaolong said solemnly, “No matter what happens in future, you must treat the Dowager kindly.”

Xiao Pan was stunned for a moment. He lowered his head and pondered over this for a while before replying emphatically, “Xiao Pan will never dare disobey Teacher’s orders. But this will only be limited to Imperial Mother, all others will not be included.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is determined to kill the two children that Zhu Ji had borne for Lao Ai. He also knows that it’s very difficult for him to interfere in such matters so he can only answer with a wry smile, “All right,

your Highness!”

Xiao Pan came closer, his hands clasped Xiang Shaolong’s shoulders and pulled him in for an embrace, and cried out frantically, “Teacher! Please do not leave Xiao Pan! Don’t you want to witness for yourself how Xiao Pan will unify the world and establish the best dynasty that has never been seen in centuries past?”

Xiang Shaolong turned his arms and held him tightly, saying sadly, “Teacher will have to leave and you have to destroy all written mention about me as well so that I will not leave a trace in history. This is fate. Even if I don’t tell you to do all these, you will ultimately do so anyway.”

Xiao Pan was taken aback and moved back a little, looking at him morosely, “How can this happen, I will never do that, no one should forget about Teacher’s great and meritorious contributions.”

Xiang Shaolong calmed down and grabbing his broad shoulders, he exclaimed, “Ever since I first saw you at the Zhao Palace, I’ve always regarded you as my son. Seeing you grow up and becoming an adult, even turning into the most powerful leader in the world, the contentment I feel in my heart is really indescribable. But precisely because of this relation, I will have to leave you. On one hand it’s because I have fulfilled my promise to your mother, to groom her son into a talent. On the other hand I want to pursue my own life and dreams. Only after I leave will you be able to totally cut off all the relationships in your past and go freely to pursue your own dreams, do you understand? We must never have this discussion again in future.”

For a moment, Xiao Pan’s eyes reddened, like a child totally in awe with his father as he laid his head on his broad chest and spoke no further.

Chapter 10

Heartfelt Words

Three days later, Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong and the rest returned to the capital.

The Dowager, with Lao Ai, led all the court officials out to welcome them.

Looking at their expressions, Zhu Ji's joy is one that comes from the heart while Lao Ai's smiling face looked quite strained.

Lao Ai is not an idiot, in fact he's a very cunning and despicable man. Naturally he knows that he's an outcast among the Crown Prince's political group.

The day that the Crown Prince gets coroneted will be the day the Dowager Zhu Ji loses her governing power, and it will be the time where he will lose all authority.

Xiang Shaolong has once again stabilized Xianyang. He is the most able leader in the military, helping Xiao Pan strengthen his hold on his throne. Once he gets rid of Pu Hu, what is left is only Lu and Lao's factions.

But over the last 10 years, Lu Buwei has been concentrating on growing his supporting faction and privately using people for his own ends so his influence is something that should not be belittled.

Xianyang may be the capital city but it still needs the support of the surrounding counties in many areas.

The local militia at the capital reports to the Chief Commandant. The Magistrate only takes care of administrative matters while the Chief Commandant is in charge of military affairs. Theoretically the military should be under the sole control of the ruler and sometimes the ruler will give orders to mobilize the troops. As for military supplies and conscription, each family will be taxed according to headcount in the family and all men, once they have reached a certain age will have to be conscripted into the army for two years; one year as active servicemen and another year as garrison soldiers to guard the borders, and they are called the Standing Army.

On top of that there are professional soldiers, who have become the main force of Great Qin.

Lu Buwei took the opportunity when repairing the Zhengguo Canal to obtain the authority to mobilize the local standing armies and this has helped him strengthen his power and control in local areas. This situation where Lu Buwei had absolute control was only broken after the birth of the Black Dragon and Xiao Pan's establishment of the Three Lords and Nine Ministers system.

But Lu Buwei has already established his own local bases during the early years. So if there is a rebellion, he'll be even more difficult to deal with compared to Cheng Qiao or Lao Ai.

So he's not worried about Cheng Qiao succeeding in usurping the throne at all, because by then he can rally his troops using the excuse of crushing the rebel forces.

But even in his wildest dreams would he never imagine that he is up against the rarest and ultimate ruler in all of China's history, the most formidable Emperor Qin.

After their return to Xianyang, it is customary to pray to the ancestors first followed by a feast.

The next morning, after the court session, Zhu Ji summoned Xiang Shaolong to Sweet Spring Palace.

Xiang Shaolong had no other choice but to brace himself to see Zhu Ji.

This powerful Dowager whose reputation is declining day by day in Qin received him at the side hall in the inner palace. After she dismissed the maids, Zhu Ji said with a solemn expression, "The Marquis of Changxin, Lao Ai, said that he was totally not involved at all in this mission to quell the rebels. Even I, as the Dowager, was kept in the dark. What is this all about? It made us all worry for nothing."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking to himself who doesn't she go and ask her own son instead of interrogating him.

But of course he won't say it out loud. Instead he answered respectfully, "The administrative and military matters are kept separate, it's quite normal that

the Marquis of Changxin won't know of this matter."

Zhu Ji stared at him, displeased, "Then why is the Chief Commandant not aware of this as well? Han Xie didn't even know you've gone out of the city into battle and so he was unable to coordinate with you at all."

After Guan Zhongxie left for the military expedition, Han Xie was promoted as the Commander with Xu Shang as his deputy.

Xiang Shaolong replied calmly, "We could emerge victorious this time because of the four words 'take them by surprise', and in order to become legendary troops, we must have various tricks to confuse the enemy and let the enemy obtain wrong information. As our enemy has a lot of ears and eyes in the capital, we have to use extreme methods and I hope your Majesty will understand."

Zhu Ji was quiet for a moment before saying with a sad sigh, "Please don't use such pretentious words on me? Zheng'er and you can hide it from everyone else but how can you lie to me? If both of you did not want the Marquis of Changxin to find out, I will not tell him."

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Zhu Ji to suddenly talk to him with such a tone of voice and attitude and the old feelings he kept hidden deeply welled up as he sighed and said, "The Crown Prince is growing day by day, he's no longer the child of the past. Now he is most concerned about how to govern the country well and unify the world. Any obstacle on this path of his will be cleared by him sooner or later. This is the road that all rulers must go through as they mature and this is something very clearly stated in history."

Zhu Ji's pretty face suddenly paled as she asked in alarm, "Shaolong, what do you mean by those words, is Zheng'er going to deal with me?"

Xiang Shaolong knows that she is having a guilty conscience because she has bore two bastards for Lao Ai and answered with a wry smile, "Of course his Highness won't be so unfilial towards your Majesty, but to other people, there's no need for him to be filial at all. Regardless of foster father or fake father, they're all the same."

Zhu Ji looked at him at a loss, and lowered her head to ask, "Tell Zhu Ji, will Xiang Shaolong deal with her?"

A surge of feelings welled in Xiang Shaolong as he said with certainty, "Even if someone puts a sword at my neck, I will never harm the Dowager."

Zhu Ji asked quietly, "What about the Marquis of Changxin?"

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback for a moment before he answered in a tone that even he himself found to be sarcastic, "If he is loyal towards the Dowager and the Crown Prince, I can guarantee that nothing will happen to him."

Of course fate would not end up like that.

The rebellion of Lao Ai is the last internal struggle just before Emperor Qin's coronation and Lu Buwei will be implicated because of this and return to the north defeated.

Suddenly, he knows that he has become an important person who can affect the political scene in the Qin empire, that's why Zhu Ji had to lower herself to ask this question and to seek his opinion.

And he has become the only person that Xiao Pan will totally trust.

Even when he released Han Chuang, Xiao Pan did not take it to heart. If it was someone else, he would have ended up being removed from his post or dragged out to be executed.

Zhu Ji's body trembled slightly as she raised her head, seemingly going to speak but stopping herself.

Xiang Shaolong said gently, "Is there anything else that your Majesty wants to ask me?"

Zhu Ji exclaimed piteously, "Tell me, what I should do?"

Xiang Shaolong understood the meaning behind those words, which is to say that she has lost control over Lao Ai and is not feeling guilt-ridden.

After all, Xiao Pan is her 'son' and although their relationship has been deteriorating, she has not come to the extent whereby she will deliberately harm her son with her lover.

And all Lao Ai wants is to retain his power.

But anyone would know this is impossible. When Xiao Pan holds absolute power, Lao Ai's only outcome is to fade out.

Xiang Shaolong was silent for a while, knowing that if he does not take this opportunity to speak his mind, he'll never have the chance in future. As to whether Zhu Ji is willing to listen to his advice, that's her problem.

He stood up and moved to the front of Zhu Ji's table and knelt down on one knee, looking at her well maintained, dewy and beautiful face, saying frankly, "If your Majesty is willing to listen to my advice, return power to his Highness earlier and bring the Minister of Ceremony with you to live in Yongdu for good. That way, the conflict between your Majesty and his Highness will be dissolved."

Zhu Ji's delicate body trembled again as she cried out softly, "Shaolong, I..."

Footsteps were heard from behind.

The both of them turned around to look in surprise, only to see Lao Ai barging in, his eyes fury with jealousy as he stared angrily at both of them.

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed.

Fate makes fun of men. In the end, there's still nothing he can do to change the situation.

When he returned to the Wu residence, the angry and venomous look in Lao Ai's eyes still haunts his mind.

Rome was not built in a day. So Lao Ai's jealousy towards him is not something that just started today.

He's the kind of person who thinks that all the women in the world should rightfully fall in love with him, someone who only takes but never gives. Compared to him, Lu Buwei's tactics are indeed a lot more brilliant.

On a certain level, Xiao Pan can still reluctantly accept Lu Buwei as a foster father but he will never acknowledge Lao Ai as his fake father.

Just based on this point alone, Lao Ai has already planted the seed of his own demise.

History has long proven that all those rulers who founded a dynasty are definitely vicious and without mercy. Xiao Pan, the Emperor of Qin, is the best of them all.

When he killed Zhao Mu with his own hands, his eyes were shining brightly as he reported to Xiang Shaolong. At that time, he could already identify Xiao Pan's bravery and he was just a 15 year old boy then.

This time, he set up a trap to kill Cheng Qiao and Du Bi and at the same time ordered his men to get rid of Pu Hu. From this, his attention to details and his merciless nature can be seen.

Of course, this is also due to his background and the incidents that had befallen him.

Just as his mind was wandering with all these information, he had already arrived at the Wu family's gates with his bodyguards.

A horse carriage was parked at the square and a few of Qin Qing's family warriors were idly chatting with the Wu family's guards. When they saw him coming, they paid their respects.

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic as he jumped down his horse and shouted, "Is Grand Tutor Qin back."

One of them replied, "She just arrived this morning."

A fiery ball of love welled in Xiang Shaolong's heart as he ran into the house. When he got to the grand hall, the beauty that he has been thinking of day and night, dressed in a simple gown, was chatting happily with Ji Yanran and the other ladies, including Shan Lan, Zhou Wei and the children. On seeing Xiang Shaolong, Qin Qing's pretty eyes brightened immediately with an indescribable fire as her delicate body trembled lightly but her expression remained calm. Obviously she was trying to control herself. Wu Tingfang said with a laugh, "Sister Qing pines for one of us, so she came back earlier."

Qin Qing's pretty face blushed immediately as she gave Wu Tingfang an angry stare, her expression extremely alluring.

Xiang Shaolong suppressed his urge to gather her into his arms as he came between her and Zhao Zhi and said with a laugh, "Grand Tutor Qin has lost weight, but looks even more alluring now." Qin Qing replied happily, "Qin

Qing may not be in Xianyang but Great General's reputation still rings loudly like thunder. What luck that my return this time coincides with Great General's victorious homecoming as well."

Shan Lan said with a laugh, "Both of you can stop pretending. It's all our own people here, must you behave so politely towards each other."

Ji Yanran helped Qin Qing out of the situation by changing the topic and telling Xiang Shaolong, "Sister Qing said that Lu Buwei went to her hometown. He was trying his utmost to get into the good books of the major local clans. What is most shameless is that the suggestion to reduce taxes came from Li Si but he boasted that it was his idea."

Zhou Wei added, "What's even more irritating is that he came on many occasions to bother Sister Qing and Sister Qing was so alarmed that she had to move somewhere else to stay."

Xiang Shaolong said with a smile, "Because he made a wrong calculation, thinking that Cheng Qiao would be able to get rid of us so there's no more need for him to control himself."

He went nearer to Qin Qing and said, "We'll return to the farm tomorrow, is Grand Tutor Qin willing to dawdle around like this for the rest of your life?"

Qin Qing blushed right to her ears and pouted, "Your official posts are getting bigger and bigger but you're getting naughtier. I'm not talking to you, I still have to go and see the Dowager and the Crown Prince."

Xiang Shaolong grabbed her small shoulders without any hesitation and whispered in her ears, “I don’t care where Grand Tutor Qin is going now, but Grand Tutor must come back here tonight to spend the night.”

Wu Tingfang was listening intently to their conversation and on hearing his words, said with a smile, “Sister Qing has already agreed, but she’s going to chat with us sisters through the night instead. Hee hee, sorry about that, Great General.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head, “That’s even more ideal.”

The ladies all reprimanded him with a laugh.

By this time, Xiang Shaolong has cast all thoughts of Zhu Ji, Lao Ai and all the fights with his enemies behind him.

At this moment, life is good. His mind flew to the thoughts of the open plains and he remembered the wide open grassland that he once went to in the 21st century while undergoing training. Blue skies, white clouds, green grass as lush as carpets spans the entire horizon, the lakes look like clear mirrors adorning the landscape with the rivers interjecting one another with the smell of clean grass filled the air. If he can spend the rest of this weird and wonderful life in peace with his wives and beloved children in this farm surrounded by nature, with no need to bother about mundane fights for power and war, how wonderful would life be?

The next day, he returned to the farm with his own and Teng Yi’s families, and of course Qin Qing was with them. The both of them were pining for

each other after being separated for so long and now is no longer bothered about how others sees them.

Ten days later, Wang Ling and Huan Qi gathered an army of 100,000 men to attack Tunliu and Pu Hu, under the pretext of avenging Cheng Qiao abandoned Qin and allied with Zhao. Wang Bi and Yang Duanhe were beaten back by Li Mu on numerous occasions and they changed their tactics to be on the defensive and managed to stabilize the various eastern commanderies and their situation was extremely dangerous. At the same time, King Heng Hui of Han died of illness and the Crown Prince ascended the throne. Han Chuang has always been on good terms with the Crown Price so he now became the Premier, becoming the most influential man in Han. Lord Longyang's power in Wei greatly increased as well and the two states relied on each other, working hand in hand to repel Qin, suppressing the eastern advancement of the two armies led by Guan Zhongxie and the Meng brothers.

On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi are leading carefree lives at the farm. There's still about two more years to go before Xiao Pan's coronation. But during this period of time, which is not so far away in the future, no one can guess what changes will happen in the meantime.

On this day, Lord Wenchang and Li Si came together to the farm to visit them. Naturally all of them were happy to see one another again.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi led the both of them on a leisurely horse ride at dusk when Lord Wenchang commented, "Lu Buwei just came back, his relationship with Lao Ai is noticeably better and they will occasionally go and

have drinks together at Drunken Wind Loft. He even let Lao Ai have Bai Yaya."

Li Si said icily, "In my opinion he's trying to repeat the devious trick he used on Cheng Qiao, which is to incite Lao Ai to rebel. Maybe he even hinted openly that he will support the bastard son he had with the Dowager to ascend the throne, then get rid of Lao Ai after that and make himself king. As Lu Buwei is still very powerful on the ground, it's possible that this is something he can accomplish."

Lord Changping added, "But there's one thing which is quite strange. After Shaolong left, the Dowager went to speak with the Crown Prince and offered to hand over part of her authority and after that will live in seclusion in Yongdu. Lao Ai is now making frequent trips between Yongdu and Xianyang but some important decisions or deployment of people still needs the Dowager's agreement before it can proceed."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly relieved that at least Zhu Ji is willing to listen to his advice, resulting in improved relations between her and Xiao Pan.

Teng Yi asked, "Is there any news from Mao Jiao's side?"

Lord Changping replied with a cold snort, "He said Lao Ai is at Yong Du cultivating talents. There's something that all of you are unaware, Ling Qi has become Yongdu's castellan. The Grand Temple is situated at Yongdu, so it's under Lao Ai's jurisdiction. It can be effectively considered that Yongdu is now under his control."

Xiang Shaolong already knew long ago that Lao Ai will certainly try to gather resources first, otherwise he won't be able to start a rebellion.

Teng Yi asked about Wang Ling and Huan Qi's battle situation.

Li Si replied with a sigh, "His Highness is still worried. Pu Hu's has retreated back to Tunliu and is staying behind the walls, refusing to come out. There's nothing Great General Wang can do to him for now. What's most worrying is that winter is fast approaching and it's a time that will benefit the defenders and not the besiegers. Besides, there's also the existence of Li Mu, he's an uncertain factor."

Lord Changping sighed, "I don't know if it's intentional on Lu Buwei's part, using the excuse that the building of the Zhengguo Canal will be completed soon and he redeployed a large number of men locally to build the canal, with the result that we now don't have many soldiers to deploy. We were just vexing over this matter."

Xiang Shaolong can't help but feel a sense of guilt. If he had agreed to Xiao Pan's request to lead the army against Tunliu that day, Wang Ling won't have to make such a torturous journey in his old age.

A pity that this has already become an unalterable fact.

A feeling of misfortune welled up in his heart.

Chapter 11

Devising Strategies

A month after Lord Changping and Li Si's visit to the farm, Xiang Shaolong's feeling of misfortune was proven correct.

Li Mu's elite troops suddenly arrived and greatly defeated the Qin army outside Tunliu. Wang Ling and Huan Qi retreated in haste about a hundred miles northwest of Tunliu, to Changzi City situated at the end of Lushui, having lost close to 30,000 men.

Wang Ling was filled with worry and anger and on top of that was overly exhausted. Two days after they arrived at Changzi City, he died of illness.

Of the four Great Generals who were around when the Black Dragon was born, only Wang Jian is left. Meng Ao, Wang Chi and Wang Ling all passed away within two years and this is an extremely heavy blow to the Qins.

Now, the only famous generals left in Qin are Xiang Shaolong and Wang Jian.

The rest like Huan Qi, Meng Wu, Meng Tian, Yang Rui, Guan Zhongxie etc, have not reached the stage where they can hold the fort on their own.

For now, Qin's grand plan of invading towards the east has temporarily come to a standstill.

If not for Xiang Shaolong who had defeated the coalition army and suppressed the uprising led by Cheng Qiao and Du Bi, maybe the Qin royalty would have to learn from the Chus and move away to avoid further trouble.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were summoned back to Xianyang. As they do not want their wives and children to take the arduous journey back, they advised them to stay behind at the farm.

Ji Yanran and the rest are already used to them leaving their homes to go on military expeditions but as their opponent this time is the trickiest and most famous general of this era, Li Mu, the ladies had to keep nagging and warning them before they allowed them to leave for Xianyang.

As usual, Xiang Shaolong went straight to the palace to see Xiao Pan while Teng Yi went to see their fifth brother Jing Jun, whom they have not met for a long time.

Xiao Pan met him alone in the palace and his expression was somber. When he saw him, he said, "This time, Wang Ling's death is caused by Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "Really?"

Xiao Pan placed his hands on the table, the frosty glance that flashed past his eyes was enough to make even Xiang Shaolong's heart run cold. This future Emperor Qin gave a cold snort, "I've already considered the possibility of the Zhaos helping in the besiege of Tunliu long ago and have given orders to Guan Zhongxie to attack the Zhaos and keep Li Mu engaged. However Lu Buwei made unreasonable objections and with the support of Lao Ai, there

were numerous delays which eventually resulted in the defeat of Tunliu. I will certainly settle this score clearly with them in future.”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, “Are they in a position to interfere in these matters?”

Xiao Pan answered angrily, “Of course not. I can only hate myself for once promising the Dowager that if for any redeployment of troops amounting to more than 100,000 men, I will need her seal of approval. According to Mai Jiao, Lao Ai deliberately ordered his men to delay the documents that I sent to the Dowager, so that it only reached her hands 10 days later. These documents were delayed for another 2 weeks on the way back. By that time, things have already happened what whatever military advantage we may have is already affected. After that, I tried to pursue this matter but the Dowager kept protecting Lao Ai. Great General Wang has died a meaningless death.”

Xiang Shaolong said with a wry smile, “So the Dowager listened to my advice and moved to Yongdu, but ended up with such side effects.”

Xiao Pan shook his head, “This is not your fault. The problem lies with Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. As long as these two are still around, we can forget about unifying the world. Ever since time memorial, one will have to govern internal affairs well before expanding outwards. Now that our internal strife are abound, how can we take over the 6 states and accomplish the grandest achievement of all times.” He paused and added, “Now our opponent is Lu Mu and it seems that we are defeated at every battle. As long as this person is not removed, we can forget about attacking Handan.”

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Is the power in Zhao now still in the hands of the Dowager Han Jing?"

Xiao Pan replied, "The current King of Zhao is even worse than King Xiaocheng. He's constantly engaged in wine and women and he's overly suspicious and prone to jealousy as well. Humph, no one knows him better than me. One day he will die in the hands of a woman and this day is not far away. No matter how smart and formidable Han Jing is, she is still a woman and only knows how to pine over Guo Kai and let this scumbag take over the court proceedings and interfere in military matters. If not for that, Li Mu may very well have fought his way here long ago."

Xiang Shaolong was surprised, "Weren't there rumors that Pang Nuan is Han Jing's gigolo?"

Xiao Pan is especially hateful of the Zhaos and said with disdain, "Han Jing is a **** who breaks all the rules of the palace so it's nothing strange if she has found a few more men."

He sighed and added, "I'm really unwilling to let Teacher lead an army to Tunliu but there's really no one else more suitable. And this is what Lu Buwei and Lao Ai really hope for."

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled, "Your Highness, why do you say that?"

It seems that Xiao Pan dared not face him. He walked towards the window and looked at the snowy imperial garden outside and said slowly with his

back to him, “Because I understand the relationship between Teacher and Li Mu. So unless Teacher promise me that you will not harbor any personal feelings, otherwise I will not allow Teacher to lead the army no matter what happens. Because Li Mu is not the likes of Pang Nuan or Han Chuang, if Teacher feels even a tiny inkling of sympathy, you will certainly be defeated.”

Xiang Shaolong was so taken aback that he was at a loss for words.

Just like how well he understands Xiao Pan, Xiao Pan is totally familiar with his thoughts as well.

The person that he really does not want to meet on the battlefield is Li Mu and this mind-set of his is enough to make it difficult for him to extend his full prowess.

But the fact is laid out right in front of him, he will have to commit to a battle of life and death with Li Mu.

Otherwise not only will Huan Qi perish, even Wang Bi and Yang Duanhe may end up in Li Mu’s hands together with the eastern commandery.

Will he be able to defeat Li Mu? This is something that even Wang Jian has no confidence in.

Xiao Pan’s breathing became heavier.

Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth and answered firmly, “Fine. I, Xiang Shaolong, will meet Li Mu and see who’s best on the battlefield. No matter

who survives or dies, just take it as an outcome befitting a warrior.”

Xiao Pan spun around and exclaimed happily, “These words that Teacher has uttered are enough to set my mind at ease.”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “How many troops can your Highness offer me?”

Xiao Pan’s mood improved as he thought over it, “No matter what, Teacher will have to wait until spring before you can leave. Lu Buwei has recently been deliberately mobilizing large numbers of soldiers to build the Zhengguo Canal so there’s not a lot of men left available. Luckily Teacher only needs elite warriors, hmm...”

Xiang Shaolong’s brows furrowed on hearing this.

Li Mu’s Zhao soldiers are the most famous in the east and he has 20,000 cavalry under him. Even the Xiong Nus, who are adept in archery and horse riding, have to admit defeat. His own Wu family elite warriors are now down to only 2,000 men and in such a situation, it’s not an easy task to win Li Mu.

Xiao Pan made some calculations and said with certainty, “I can give Teacher 20,000 foot soldiers. They are all able-bodied soldiers and Teacher can take your pick on who to appoint as the Deputy General. On top of Huan Qi’s troops at Changzi City, the total force will amount to 120,000 and it should be enough to face off Li Mu’s estimated force of 100,000 men.”

The both of them discussed a little further before Xiao Pan summoned Lord Changping and after arrangements were made, Xiang Shaolong left together

with lord Changping.

Xiang Shaolong can't help but ask, "Is the building of the Zhengguo Canal really hindering us that much?"

Lord Changping sighed, "The Zhengguo Canal is indeed using up a lot of our men and resources but the main problem is that Lu Buwei is trying to resist the central government using the local forces, using another method to gain control of our great Qin's military affairs. Especially now that he and Lao Ai are making use of each other, such that on many instances the Dowager had to stand on their side. There's really nothing his Highness can do, like the death of Wang Ling is really uncalled for."

Xiang Shaolong thought of Wang He and Wang Ling and all the old hatred and new enmity welled up in him.

In another two years, he will be able to exact revenge with his own hands.

Lord Changping walked out with him and said quietly, "Mao Jiao sent news that under Lu Buwei's covert support, Lao Ai is now secretly organizing a gang of supporters, even the Dowager is kept in the dark."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "What kind of supporters?"

Lord Changping replied, "It's an extremely secret organization and those who join all have to make a deadly vow that they will remain loyal only to Lao Ai. After that Lao Ai will try to place them in various military positions so that when the time comes for a rebellion in future, they will be able to help him."

He paused and continued, “According to his Highness’s prediction, Lao Ai and Lu Buwei’s scheme will take place during his coronation ceremony because according to the rites, his Highness must travel to the Grand Temple in Yongdu for the coronation. Lao Ai will be able to make arrangements for the ceremony in his capacity as Minister of Rites and because Yongdu are full of their men, it’ll be a lot easier for them to rebel there than in Xianyang. But we’ve already guessed that this is their plan, so naturally we will not let them succeed.”

Xiang Shaolong said with a wry smile, “They have already started on their scheme. First it’s Wang He, then it’s Wang Ling. If not for the fact that Huan Qi is an outstanding general, he may have met with mishap as well. Lu Buwei is a master at scheming after all. He can get rid of us one by one without even bloodying his own sword and now it’s finally my turn.”

Lord Changping was taken aback, “Shaolong, don’t say such inauspicious words. Now, besides Shaolong and Wang Jian, there’s no one else in Great Qin who can be a match against Li Mu. Shaolong you must gather your faith and accomplish another great deed for his Highness.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Li Mu and said honestly, “I’ll try my best.”

Lord Changping suggested, “Why don’t we go and look for Li Si to discuss this?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and took his leave to go to the Cavalry Official Department.

After Teng Yi and Jing Jun heard his updates, Teng Yi said, “His Highness is right, there is no place for personal feelings on the battlefield. Because it’s not a problem involving only two people, but it involves the lives of thousands of soldiers and their wives and children, as well as the fate and pride of a country.”

Xiang Shaolong was startled, “I really didn’t spare that much thought to it.”

Teng Yi was silent for a moment before saying in all seriousness, “I do have a suggestion, which is to immediately select a troop of elite soldiers and gather them at the farm to give them intense training like what we did with our elite warriors. Our family warriors like Jing Shan, Wu Yan etc will be the military leaders and each leader will have 5,000 men under him. In that way, we can mobilize them as easily as moving our arms and we will be able to strike most effectively in battle.”

Xiang Shaolong was energized as he remembered the training methods for the elite troops in the 21st century and happily agreed.

For the next 10 days, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi stayed in the Cavalry Official Department in the capital to personally select 45,000 men from the reinforcement troops, cavalry, city guards and imperial guards. They were split into 9 sections with Jing Shan and the 18 Warriors as the Officers and Deputy Officers and 2 sections will form an army. Jing Jun, Wu Guo and Zhao Da will be the Commanders of the 3 armies while he will personally lead the remaining 2,000 Wu family elite warriors as the Grand Commander with Teng Yi as his deputy. Naturally Zhou Liang will become the leader of the scouting team.

Most of the people were with Xiang Shaolong in his two previous battles and once they heard that he is leading the army, their morale were greatly boosted and they were willing to lay down their lives for this mission.

Lu Buwei and Lao Ai were surprisingly cooperative because naturally they were hoping that he would go earlier and die faster so he can never return to Xianyang again.

Therefore Xiang Shaolong sought Xiao Pan's permission to move the entire army to the farm and making use of the various facilities, trained the soldiers day and night, hoping to make use of these 3 bitter winter months before spring arrives to cultivate another massive army of elite soldiers.

On this day, because of the heavy snow, the soldiers were all staying in the farm. Xiang Shaolong was having dinner with his wives and son when Learned Lady Ji commented, "Ultimately, warfare is about the art of trickery. Therefore the best leader will first strategize to hinder the enemy's plans, next will be the battle on the field and finally to besiege a walled city. So we must pretend to be unable to attack even if we can, and make the enemy believe that we are far away when we are not*. Sun Tzu even openly said that nothing is too deceitful in war. Now Yanran has seen how dear husband is training the troops and indeed your methods are refreshing and startling. Especially they way you hide how the battle is fought, nothing on earth can indeed compare to it. But I wonder if dear husband have thought of a strategy to defeat the enemy."

* From Sun Tzu's Art of War

Qin Qing added gently and affectionately, “Yanran’s questions are not pointless, Pu Hu’s influence is very strong at the eastern commandery and he has made many repairs and modifications to Tunliu before. The city walls are high and the rivers wide. Now he won’t be afraid of us attacking him because he’ll be able to wait it out and counter out active attacks with passiveness. Now even Wang Ling and Huan Qi, who are well versed in the art of war and had the command of Great Qin’s elite soldiers ended up being defeated and had to retreat so it goes to show that Pu Hu is not someone like Zhao Gua and there won’t be a loss like that of Changping. On top of that, Li Mu is eyeing us from the sideline. Shaolong you must not just use brute force.”

On hearing this, Xiang Shaolong can feel himself sweating. The battle strategy this time will have to attack a strong and walled city and at the same time deal with Li Mu’s sudden attacks. It’s wishful thinking if one thinks that one can win using the normal rules of engagement. The biggest problem now is that Huan Qi is now leading a newly defeated army and he himself does not have enough troops and it’s impossible to split up and handle two different battles at the same time. Besides, Pu Hu has always been unfathomable and Li Mu is an extremely experienced talent in mobilizing troops. The outcome of this battle can almost be known without even fighting it.

Wu Tingfang suggested a plan, “Can we send someone to infiltrate inside the city of Tunliu first?”

Ji Yanran replied, “How would the enemy not be on alert against such a trick. Besides Tunliu belonged to the Zhaos and it’ll be even more difficult for the Qins to infiltrate.”

Xiang Shaolong searched his brains for memories of examples besieging cities from the last thousand years since 'ancient time' to now. He almost fried his brains thinking and couldn't think of any brilliant plan at that moment so he gave up.

After dinner, Xiang Shaolong lied down on the mat with his head resting on Wu Tingfang's soft thighs and started thinking again.

Ji Yanran and the rest dare not disturb his train of thought and accompanied him quietly by the side.

The Tian sisters accompanied Xiang Bao'er back to bed.

The fireplaces in the four corners were all burning so they do not feel the cold frost outside at all.

Xiang Shaolong thought of the Mohist Addendum, which stated these words 'the way to attack a city is to surround it on four sides but to leave a corner open to indicate an escape route to lure the enemy into breaking out'. But obviously this is not suited to be used at Tunliu City. Because with Li Mu at the side, he is in no way able to block the entire city.

Basically, it takes only four steps to attack a city, namely to cross the river, attack the city gates and walls, climb over the walls and lastly the battle in the streets and alleys.

But as their enemy has the protection of a moat and they are at a higher

location, which is advantageous to them and on top of that, they can easily switch from a defensive position to an offensive one at any time and suddenly launch an attack. So if they follow the normal rules of engagement, their losses will be momentous. If he is Li Mu, he will make use of the time when the Qin army is exhausted to lead an attack. By then, if his army is not wiped out, he'll have to thank Heavens for it.

So how can he change this situation where they can only act in response?

Too bad Pu Hu does not like wooden horse, otherwise he can re-enact what happened in the west during the Trojan War.

Suddenly he had an idea and he sat up in joy and shouted, "I've got it."

The map was spread open on the mat. Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the rest were all concentrating on it but they still have no idea what tricks Xiang Shaolong have up his sleeve.

Xiang Shaolong pointed at a big city inside the Zhao border named Zhongmou and said, "This city is an important place in the Zhao's northern border and the Zhao Capital is 120 miles north of here while Tunliu is 130 miles northwest of here. Therefore the distance to any of these two places from Zhongmou is roughly the same. But to the east of Zhongmou there is an official road leading to Handan and it'll only take 3 days on a swift horse to reach Handan. If we can take down this city, what do you think will be the reaction of the Zhao King?"

Teng Yi banged the table in admiration, "Of course he'll be terrified that we'll

attack his capital. We're all well aware of Guo Kai's standard."

Qin Qing furrowed her brows, "Zhongmou is situated along the borders of Zhao and Wei and have always been tightly guarded. How can it be so easily taken down by you? Besides, at the north of Handan there's another long wall spanning about a hundred miles protecting the capital. The Zhao army has been stationed there for a long time and if your 40,000 odd men were to infiltrate them, it'll really be very dangerous."

Ji Yanran said with a smile, "Lord Husband will definitely have another brilliant plan, Sister Qing please listen on carefully."

Xiang Shaolong smiled at Qin Qing and replied, "Please listen to your husband's explanation." Qin Qing saw that he was addressing himself as her husband was felt both embarrassed and happy at the same time, and she stared at him in reproach.

Xiang Shaolong said, "This time we're going all out regardless of the consequences. Now Guan Zhongxie is deploying troops to the city of Xuanshi in Han and it's only 80 miles away from Tunliu and about a hundred odd miles to Zhongmou. We might as well get a secret edict from his Highness to go to Xuanshi and take away Guan Zhongxie's military command, taking over his 130,000 men for our own use. That way our forces will be boosted and the best thing is the Zhaos will still think that we will be coming up from the south to Changzi city to meet up with Huan Qi before going on to invade Tunliu. Therefore they will surely concentrate their forces at Shangdang to better deal with us."

Jing Jun said viciously, “Best is we can get rid of Guan Zhongxie at the same time.”

Qin Qing commented, “Won’t that be the same as forcing Lu Buwei to rebel immediately, don’t forget Guan Zhongxie is his beloved son-in-law.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “Once we reach Xuanshi, we will split our forces in two, one obvious and one secret to move in so that the Zhaos will think that we are going to Changzi city but in fact we will be crossing the river towards Zhongmou. We’ll catch them unawares and our Wu family’s elite warriors will climb over the city walls in the middle of the night. As long as we can seize control of one of the city gates, we’ll be able to take over Zhongmou.”

Teng Yi nodded his head, “Best is if we can smuggle someone into Handan first and create some rumors to make the people panic. Then the Zhaos will have to summon Li Mu back to protect the Capital and Tunliu won’t be that impossible to obtain.”

Ji Yanran exclaimed excitedly, “At the same time we have to ask Xiao Bi and Duan He to lead their armies and make a major counter attack to engage Pang Nuan and Sima Shang’s two armies. By then Li Mu’s summons to leave Tunliu will become a surety.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “The most difficult part of this matter is how can we move the troops so far, crossing the river from Xuanshi towards Zhongmou without letting our enemy find out. Otherwise it’ll just end up as another long drawn siege attack.”

Ji Yanran studied the map and replied, “You can pretend to be going towards Changzi City first and split up your troops once you reach the southern shore of River Lu. From here to Zhongmou, it’s all wilderness. As long as the troops move rapidly, even if someone sees them, there won’t be enough time for them to inform the city guards of Zhongmou, so the number of men cannot be too big. Also, the light cavalry must go first with their light packs, followed by the foot soldiers. Zhou Liang’s Eagle King can be put to the greatest use in such situations.”

At this point in time, everyone was filled with confidence, almost wishing that they can attack Zhongmou immediately.

Teng Yi said, “If we can send 50,000 men to Changzi City to meet up with Huan Qi, our army size will reach almost 120,000 but to take down Tunliu, it’s not something that can be accomplished within one or two months. I’m worried that by that time the Zhaos would have figured out our actual force and send troops to attack. With enemies in front and behind us, our situation is still bleary.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “Pu Hu is still a merchant at heart, he’s just relying on the Zhaos. He only had the guts to rebel because being caught will mean his entire clan getting exterminated. The soldiers in the city are all a motley crew gathered hurriedly so as long as we successfully spread rumors to make them panic and deliberately give them an escape route, I guarantee that Tunliu will fall without a battle and no one will put up a real fight.”

Zhao Zhi said, “Their first fear is of course that the Zhaos will abandon them, but what can we use to scare them after that?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “It’s simple, make use of the strategy of villages surrounding a city. Take over all the villages nearby, move the villagers away and make sure Tunliu lose their supply of food and grains. Set up camp outside the city of Tunliu and build various equipments for besieging a city. Make it look as if we’re planning a long haul siege and I guarantee that in less than two weeks, Pu Hu will try to think of a way to slip away.”

Jing Jun said with a smirk, “If he doesn’t slip away, we’ll just launch a damn attack.”

Wu Tingfang chided, “Xiao Jun, can you mind your words?” Qin Qing saw that everyone’s gaze was on her so she shrugged her dainty shoulders and said, “I’ve gotten used to it long ago!”

Everyone smiled.

Xiang Shaolong continued, “We’ll have to think about the whole plan in more detail and then send someone to inform Xiao Qi, Xiao Bi and Duan He immediately. This matter must be kept absolutely secret, otherwise it won’t work if word gets out.”

By now, although it’s very late into the night, how were Xiang Shaolong and his two brothers able to sleep. After the ladies went to bed, they continued their discussion all the way until dawn before they went on their separate ways to carry out their tasks.

Chapter 12

False Alarm

After having a confirmed plan of action, Xiang Shaolong and the rest changed their training methods and split the army into two groups. 20,000 cavalry were specially trained in undercover and camouflage warfare.

Xiang Shaolong used what he has learnt in the 21st century on this group of cavalry.

In a twinkling of an eye, winter is ending and spring is approaching. Xiao Pan came to send off the troops personally in a ceremony and Xiang Shaolong left for another military expedition once again.

The army travelled in ships downstream, landing at Wusui and walked towards the northeast straight towards Xuanshi City where Guan Zhongxie is at.

Guan Zhongxie, Lian Jiao, Zhao Pu led their army out of the city to welcome them. Of course they appeared extremely polite on the surface, giving them the respect due to a superior.

Xiang Shaolong asked Wu Guo, Jing Jun and the rest to set up camp outside the city and in order not to incur Guan Zhongxie's suspicions, he only led Teng Yi and a thousand personal guards into the city. Only after they reached the Commander's Residence did they take out Xiao Pan's imperial edict to

order Guan Zhongxie to hand over his military token immediately and to return to the Capital to continue his duties.

After Guan Zhongxie read the imperial edict, his countenance changed, “What’s the meaning of this, why are there no orders from Premier Lu? And the Dowager’s imperial seal is missing from this edict.”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised and commented, “Why is General Guan so nervous, his Highness is just being concerned that Lord Guan has been working so hard and stationed outside the pass for the whole year, that’s why he’s allowing General Guan to return to Xianyang for a short holiday. It’s just a simple matter of changing of guards, is there a need to trouble Lord Lu and the Dowager on this?”

At this time Teng Yi saw Lian Jiao moving backwards and hurriedly gave out a command, their accompanying personal guards immediately took out their crossbows and took control of the situation. There’s no way Guan Zhongxie will expect Xiang Shaolong to have such a move. He saw him smiling icily with his hand on the sheath of Hundred Battles Blade and knows that one wrong word would mean immediate decapitation. He raised his hand to stop his men from making senseless retaliation and his countenance changed to a pleasant smile as he said, “Great General has reprimanded me well. In fact I was really hoping to go back and see Niangrong too.”

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, “We cannot go against a ruler’s orders, I am just following instructions. It’s great that General Guan is willing to cooperate.”

He's not worried that Guan Zhongxie will disobey, unless he wants to rebel immediately. Otherwise this is the only outcome available.

The next day, Xiang Shaolong, on the pretext of sending them off, ordered Jing Jun to ensure that Guan Zhongxie and his 2,000 personal guards were escorted to Wusui and to make sure that they board the ship before he returns to Xuanshi.

By this time Xiang Shaolong has completed the redeployment of Guan's army and the cavalry was increased to 50,000 men, the light infantry had 50,000 men and the heavy artillery forces had 80,000 men and their strength was immediately boosted.

They trained for another month in Xuanshi before they left Xuanshi and travelled along the river up north towards Changzi City.

They travelled slowly but steadily, making sure that the soldiers get ample rest and maintain their energy at a full level.

When they reached the southern bank of the River Lu, the 180,000-strong army stopped and waited for night to fall.

Huan Qi hurried over on hearing the news and when they met, everyone was filled with both sadness and happiness as they told one another what happened while they were apart. He left with Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Huan Qi, Zhou Liang, Wu Guo, Zhao Da and the rest to the Commander's Residence to hold a meeting.

Huan Qi first reported the situation at Tunliu and analyzed, “Inside Tunliu, there are only about a thousand odd men who are old subordinates of Du Bi and Chang Qiao, the rest are Pu Hu’s family warriors and local rebels who were from Zhao. The situation is a little similar to the peasants rebellion which happened a few years ago in the east, they are full of valor but no actual capability. But the biggest problem is Li Mu’s 100,000 strong Zhao army stationed at Lu City within the Zhao border 40 miles of Tunliu. They can respond immediately if called for and not only are they a source of support for Tunliu, we also dare not attack Tunliu without reservations.” When he spoke of Li Mu, his expression revealed an underlying fear.

Teng Yi signed and asked, “How did you lose that battle?”

Huan Qi replied painfully, “The way Li Mu fights a battle is like performing a magic trick. Great General and I were already keeping a real close eye on the movements within the Zhao border and planted our scouts far and wide. We did not expect that just after we received the alarm, Li Mu’s cavalry has already reached our camp and it was a bright and starry night. Li Mu ordered his men to take over the highlands first and burned the camp with fire arrows. The Tunliu rebel forces took the opportunity to charge out as well, drumming the signal for attack. We could not even last until dawn and were utterly defeated. I led a group of 10,000 men and tried out best to fend off the pursuers, otherwise the number of our casualties will be even higher.”

On hearing that, everyone felt a cold chill.

Huan Qi continued agitatedly, “After Great general Wang passed away, I led our very demoralized troops to attack Lu City twice but we were forced back

by Li Mu. His strategies are ever changing, his soldiers brave and their training excellent. No wonder his fame can spread so far and wide.”

Jing Jun commented, “It doesn’t matter how formidable Li Mu is, it’s no use if there’s a excellent general but no good ruler. Have Xiao Qi sent anyone to check the situation over at Zhongmou?”

Huan Qi’s spirit was lifted as he took out a rolled up map and opened it on the table, saying, “I took advantage of the heavy snow to order my men to scout on the enemy’s situation so I’m sure the enemy knows nothing at all. Zhongmou is the Zhao’s most important military base outside of Chang City and it originally belonged to the Weis. It only landed in Zhao hands four years ago, so that they have another vital point outside out Chang City, that’s why it’s very heavily regarded.”

After everyone had some discussion, he continued, “There are two groups of Zhao army permanently stationed outside the city, about 10,000 men or so at the north and south to cover each other. Their initial use should be to deal with the Weis. Inside the city there are about 20,000 men guarding it and for a city of Zhao, such numbers are very rare. If anything happens, the soldiers inside the city can come out to provide reinforcements. That’s why in the many attempts by the Weis to attack the Zhaos, they have been unable to take over Zhongmou, this important city.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “That’s why we must surprise them in this battle and take them unawares. Otherwise this batter will be a certain defeat.”

Huan Qi said, “The Zhaos have built a hundred odd beacon stations on higher

grounds outside the city and there are sentries there day and night. If a huge army were to advance, they will find out even if it's at night. It's very difficult to go under their radar."

Jing Jun tapped his chest and assured them, "Let me be in charge of this. I guarantee that not a single one of those beacons will be able to sound any alarm."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Tonight, our 40,000 strong elite cavalry will be split into 4 teams and set off in batches after dark. Jing Jun will lead 10,000 as vanguards to clear the beacons. The other 140,000 men will stay here for three more days before they are split up into two teams of 70,000 men each with one team going towards Changzi and the other towards Zhongmou. The day that Li Mu returns to the capital will be the time that Xiao Qi strikes. Remember to make it look as if it's going to be a drawn out battle, you must not take the risk to attack the city otherwise Li Mu will advance even though he may look like he's retreating and a replay of the battle that night will happen. Then this loss will be totally not worth it."

Huan Qi was taken aback as he replied, "No wonder both the previous Great Generals were so full of praise for Great General Xiang before their deaths. I have not thought of this point at all and when you mentioned it, the thought of it made me break out into a cold sweat immediately."

Wu Guo said with a smile, "It's time to eat." Everyone were laughing and jibing one another. As they left the tent, Xiang Shaolong said to Huan Qi, "After you take over Tunliu, immediately start works on repairing and building up defenses. We will pretend to be defeated by Chang City, situated

on the border separating Zhao and Wei before suddenly retreating so that the Zhaos will find it difficult to pursue us.”

Huan Qi was high spirited and totally impressed as he nodded his head.

That night, once it's dark, Zhou Liang released Eagle King. After making sure that there are no hidden enemy scouts, Jing Jun's team consisting of the Wu family's elite warriors set off first and in a short while, the four teams of men set off one after another, travelling slowly on horseback.

By the morning of the third day, the army have reached the dense forest 40 miles away from Zhongmou and set up sentries around them. They waited for night to fall.

Zhongmou City is situated in the middle of the plain, with high and thick city walls. It's indeed a tough and important stronghold for the military. The trees outside the city were cut down so it's really not easy to approach without being seen.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi observed the area for a long time and they both felt discouraged, but couldn't think of any good ideas at all.

All of them dare not start fires for cooking so they survived on dried rations.

By dusk, there was a sudden strong wind and rain started pouring.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest exclaimed that even Heaven is helping them as they set off immediately.

Wu Guo and Zhou Liang each led an army to attack the Zhao camp outside the city.

Jing Jun led a thousand We family fighters, crossed the moat and climbed over the walls into the city.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi's main force of 20,000 men went towards the hiding point nearest to the city to get ready for the city gates to open so that they can charge in.

The rain was getting heavier with the occasional thunder and lightning. Visibility was low and the thunders also covered the sounds of the horses hooves totally.

Jing Jun's thousand-strong elite troops tied up their warhorses outside the city and took more than two hours to cross the moat and begin climbing up the walls.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were waiting with palpitating hearts because if the enemy were to discover them now, no one in Jing Jun's team will survive.

The lanterns on top of the city walls were dimmed by the heavy rain.

Just as they were nervously waiting, the city gates facing the west opened and the drawbridge was lowered.

Xiang and Teng were ecstatic as they gave the order and the whole army

swarmed out. The thundering hooves of 20,000 warhorses shattered the sweet dreams of the city guards in Zhongmou, but everything is too late by now.

Wu Guo and Zhou Liang's armies launched a simultaneous attack on the two Zhao army camps outside the city.

Battle cries and screams shook the earth inside and outside the city.

Although the thunderstorm has stopped, the battle has become even fiercer.

The army charged into the city, scaring the people into shutting their doors tight and half of the city guards removing their armors and abandoning their posts as they hid in residential houses to preserve their lives. The rest opened up the city gates and ran for their lives.

They've totally lost their will to retaliate.

By dawn, this most important and strategic city for the Kingdom of Zhao in the north has fallen into Xiang Shaolong's hands.

For the next 10 days, Zhao Da, leading more than 10,000 foot soldiers gradually arrived, bringing with them a large number of siege machinery, supplies and food. They also established the supply route from Xuanshi City to here.

Xiang Shaolong gave strict orders not to harass the civilians and to treat the surrendered soldiers with courtesy, using the approach of assuring the

civilians.

Teng Yi set up base camps outside the city, started on building up defenses and cut off the official roads that connect between Zhao and Wei, making it look as if they are preparing for a massive attack on the Zhao Capital, Handan.

A month later, the Zhaos came twice to attack but were fought off on both attempts.

The Weis were on the alert. Their forces were on strict patrol along the border but as the Qin army has control of a sturdy city, the Weis only kept a close monitor.

No one dares to harbor any disparaging thoughts towards this famous Qin general, Xiang Shaolong.

On this day, Wu Ji came from Changzi city to see Xiang Shaolong and brought with him important news. According to the reports from their spies in Handan, Guo Kai is indeed petrified and trying to persuade the Zhao King and Dowager to summon Li Mu back to protect the palace in the capital.

But after the King of Zhao gave the orders, Li Mu actually rejected them.

Xiang and Teng were secretly in awe, knowing that Li Mu has seen through their ploy.

After some discussion, the two of them decided to launch a massive attack at

Fanwu.

Once all arrangements were made, Xiang Shaolong activated the 80,000 strong army ten days later and traveled up to Fanwu via the official roads. They set up camp and formations outside the city walls of the Zhaos and launched attacks on the city walls day and night. The Zhaos came out of the city to attack the camp a few times but each time the Qin army was able to find out about the attacks first and defeat them utterly.

After attacking for 18 days, they finally broke down a section of the city wall but they were fought off by the enemy. Both sides suffered heavy casualties.

But Xiang Shaolong and the rest know that their mission is accomplished for this time they need not worry that the King of Zhao won't summon Li Mu back to guard Fanwu. The truth is, with their current numbers, they do not have the capability to attack Handan at all.

The Zhaos only took one day to repair the wall.

Xiang Shaolong retreated his soldiers and did not attack so as to let their warriors have a chance to catch their breath. The dead were cremated on the spot while the injured soldiers were sent back to Zhongmou.

By this time, Xiang Shaolong is already numb to all the deaths on the battlefield, otherwise he'll never be able to become the Grand Commander of this Qin army.

Xiao Pan is right. There is no place for compassion on the battlefield.

Everyone is just a pawn on the chessboard, it's common to eat others or be eaten.

But the things that are within his control, he has already done them. For example caring for his subordinates, treating surrendered troops and civilians kindly etc. He wonders if the Zhaos are petrified of all the fights and they've stopped coming out of the city to retaliate and the two armies fell into a stalemate.

Huan Qi followed Xiang Shaolong's instructions and put on a huge act about sending in reinforcements constantly to increase the Zhao people's sense of fear.

As they entered the second month of summer, Li Mu finally succumbed to the King of Zhao's orders and returned to Handan.

Xiang Shaolong immediately gave orders to fortify their defenses and get ready to deal with Li Mu's retaliation.

The thing that he had most wanted to avoid is finally right in front of his eyes.

On this day, Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun were doing the routine patrolling along the five miles long stockade when Jing Jun said with a smile, "Even if Li Mu has three heads and six arms, he'll find it difficult to take down our camp. At the most, it'll be a draw." Teng Yi asked, "Are there any movement on the Wei side?"

Jing Jun replied, “Wu Guo is taking care of the Weis, but if we have not taken down Zhongmou, we would have been fought off long ago.”

That night, Xiang Shaolong had a nightmare. He dreamt that Li Mu came to attack the camp and everywhere within the camp, is filled with his famous cavalry and all the tents were burning at the same time. Xiang Shaolong rushed out of the tent and wanted to call out for Teng Yi and Jing Jun but no sound came out. He wanted to pull out his blade but his Hundred Battles Blade was missing and he woke up in shock. Only to realize that the sky is still dark but he was drenched in cold sweat and panting hard.

Xiang Shaolong had an intense thought of his beloved wives, maids and child at home and had the urge to cast everything aside and return to Xianyang immediately.

Once his nerves were settled, he wrapped a cloak around him and walked out the tent.

The personal guards who were on night duty hurriedly followed after him.

His commander’s tent is situated at a higher ground. As he looked around, he saw that beneath the stars, there were tiny dots of firelight that seems to stretch endlessly towards the horizon.

The city that belonged to the Zhaos five miles away was fully lighted and looked utterly impressive.

Xiang Shaolong thought of the time when he left Handan to go to Daliang,

he'd actually passed by this place and was shown around the city walls. He's forgotten the name of the city guard in charge of showing him around but he did not expect that on this day so many years later, he'll be the one in charge of attacking the same city walls.

The uncertainty of life cannot be summed up more accurately than this.

He then thought about his two beloved that he had once escorted, Zhao Qian and Zhao Ya, who has since died one after the other and can't help but feel a his heart breaking. He almost felt like crying out loud to ease the pain in his heart.

The night breeze blew at him, blowing away the tightness in his chest and only then did he feel slightly better.

Looking at the city walls far ahead, he remembered the ancient city of Handan just a distance away from behind those walls and a mixture of feelings welled up in him.

The scariest thing about wars is the unpredictable factor.

Just like now, he has absolutely no idea what is happening right now behind those walls that spans hundreds of miles.

He can only guess.

Or do an evaluation.

To know oneself and know one's enemy, it's indeed not so easily achieved.

Where exactly is Li Mu right now? They were once bosom buddies but now they finally have to become mortal enemies on the battlefield and what exactly are they doing all these for? Only when the day started getting bright that Xiang Shaolong composed himself and went back to the tent to rest.

That's how the days were spent.

A month later, the messenger came with the news that Pu Hu has finally abandoned Tunliu and was ambushed and captured by Huan Qi's hidden troops when he was escaping towards the Zhao borders and escorted back to Xianyang.

Strangely, there has been no activity from Li Mu up to this point in time.

Xiang and Teng were not too alarmed, for if Li Mu has been ordered to protect Handan, naturally he won't be coming to Fanwu.

Since their goal has been accomplished, the two of them had a discussion and decided to retract their troops and they will do it that very night.

As usual, they left behind empty camps but with lanterns burning. As soon as it got dark, they retreated back to Zhongmou in batches. Xiang Shaolong and Zhou Liang were the last to leave because with Eagle King's sharp eyes, they're not afraid that the enemy will come up behind them.

Jing Jun left first with 2,000 Wu family warriors, followed by Teng Yi's army.

Xiang Shaolong waited until about 10pm before he led the remaining 20,000 men and snuck away.

In a short while, the whole army has arrived on the official roads towards south, rapidly moving towards Zhongmou.

The bright moon is hanging in the sky to the left of them, casting a dim shadow on their right.

Xiang Shaolong rode alongside Zhou Liang in the middle of the army.

Zhou Liang commented with a sigh, "We were able to take down Tunliu this time all thanks to the wondrous plan of Great General. Even Li Mu has been fallen for your plan."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Li Mu did not fall for my plan, it's the King of Zhao who fell for my plan."

Zhou Liang said with a smile, "In war, only success or failure matters, no one cares how the victory is achieved but everyone will talk about how one is defeated."

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head, "Your words sound very correct."

Zhou Liang looked up into the sky and said, "It'll be dawn in another hour and by then we'll be able to travel at full speed. Once we reach Zhongmou, we'll be able to advance or retreat at will without any worries at all. Besides, even

if our enemy surround the city, we still have Huan Qi's army as reinforcements."

Xiang Shaolong immediately felt relaxed, feeling a little as if he has achieved the goals of this mission.

Hopefully this will be the last battle and the only thing to look forward to in future will be the arrival of Xiao Pan's coronation ceremony.

The familiar sound of Eagle King flapping his wings was heard from the sky.

All the soldiers lifted their heads to look.

Looking at its behavior, they know that there's no pursuing army.

Zhou Liang pursed his lips and whistled, ordering him to come down to rest.

However, Eagle King suddenly cried out and circled twice over their heads before soaring into the sky again, suddenly flying towards the woods on their right.

Zhou Liang's expression changed immediately as he focused on Eagle King's actions.

Xiang Shaolong felt that something is greatly amiss and looked over as well.

Eagle King kept flying in circles under the bright moonlight, its flight pattern strange and indecipherable.

Zhou Liang exclaimed in alarm, “That is impossible. It seems that there’s a huge troop of our enemy rushing here from the left at a very fast speed.”

In an instant, Xiang Shaolong understood what is happening. Li Mu’s cavalry is coming.

Maybe their horses have their hooves covered in cloths so there wasn’t any sound at all.

This famous general who indeed lives up to his reputation has already deduced Xiang Shaolong’s strategy long ago.

Although he was forced to give up Tunliu, he is unwilling to let them off. He has been staying put for the last two months to make Xiang Shaolong and the rest mistakenly think that he is stationed at Handan. In fact, he has been here long ago and have set up an ambush, just waiting for the moment of their retreat.

Xiang Shaolong is now following the fatal footsteps of Cheng Qiao and Du Bi. The only advantage he has is that because of Eagle King, he is one step ahead in fining out the enemy’s approach.

If he were to escape immediately, the result will be not much different from Cheng Qiao’s army’s defeat. This means to say that before the whole army can arrive at Zhongmou, they would have been eliminated by Li Mu.

If he faces the battle head on, then at least Jing Jun and Teng Yi can reach

Zhongmou safely.

Xiang Shaolong hesitated no further and gave orders for the army to retreat to the dense forest towards the right and do their best to block the enemy.

Before they could even complete their formation, tens of thousands of Zhao soldiers charged out towards the official path from the left of the dense forest, charging towards them.

Arrows flew towards their enemies like locusts. The enemy's cavalry fell down row by row but before they could notch the second arrow, suddenly the enemy is right in front of them.

Xiang Shaolong roared his orders as he pulled out Hundred Battles Blade and led his men in the charge.

In a short moment, the whole 10 miles stretch of the official path is filled with battle cries and screams.

Just as the 20,000 Qin soldiers were fending off the enemy, there was a sudden chaos near the Zhao border. Another group of enemy seemed to charge out of nowhere and cut off Xiang Shaolong's reinforcements into two parts.

Xiang Shaolong, with Zhou Liang and 2,000 personal guards fought off the enemy's wave after wave of attacks with their lives.

Crackling sounds were suddenly heard from the woods behind them as the

fire burned, cutting off the Qin army's retreat route to the west. Xiang Shaolong knows that it's unavoidable, so he put aside everything else and cut down 10 odd enemy soldiers and killed his way right into the depths of the enemy's formation.

End of Book 20